

## Narrative and Identity

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# Narrative and Identity

An Ethical Reading of Exodus 4

*By*

Athena E. Gorospe



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Manila, Philippines

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|                  |                                                                                        |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AB               | Anchor Bible                                                                           |
| ABD              | <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D.N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992       |
| AOTC             | Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries                                                    |
| APV              | <i>Asia Pacific Viewpoint</i>                                                          |
| Aq.              | Aquila                                                                                 |
| <i>b. Ned.</i>   | Babylonian Talmud ( <i>Bavli</i> ), Tractate Nedarim                                   |
| BASOR            | <i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>                           |
| BCBC             | Believer's Church Bible Commentary                                                     |
| BH               | "Biblical Hermeneutics" by P. Ricoeur. In <i>Semeia</i> 4 (1975): 29–148               |
| <i>Bib</i>       | <i>Biblica</i>                                                                         |
| BKAT             | Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament. Edited by M. Noth and H.W. Wolff                |
| BR               | Bible Review                                                                           |
| BSac             | <i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>                                                               |
| BZAW             | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft                        |
| CAT              | Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament                                                      |
| CBC              | Cambridge Bible Commentary                                                             |
| CC               | Continental Commentaries                                                               |
| <i>Cels.</i>     | <i>Contra Celsum</i> by Origen                                                         |
| ConC             | Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture                     |
| ConBOT           | Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series                                              |
| <i>ConJud</i>    | <i>Conservative Judaism</i>                                                            |
| CSCO             | Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium. Edited by I.B. Chabot et al. Paris, 1903– |
| <i>CulAnthro</i> | <i>Cultural Anthropology</i>                                                           |
| CV               | <i>Communio viatorum</i>                                                               |
| CWS              | Classics of Western Spirituality. New York, 1978–                                      |
| <i>Enc</i>       | <i>Encounter</i>                                                                       |
| EP               | <i>The Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> . Edited by P. Edwards. 8 vols. New York, 1967   |

|                   |                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>ER</i>         | <i>The Encyclopedia of Religion</i> . Edited by M. Eliade. 16 vols. New York, 1987                                                      |
| ESV               | English Standard Version                                                                                                                |
| <i>ETR</i>        | <i>Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses</i>                                                                                               |
| <i>Exod. Rab.</i> | <i>Exodus Rabbah</i>                                                                                                                    |
| <i>ExpTim</i>     | <i>Expository Times</i>                                                                                                                 |
| FC                | Fathers of the Church. Washington, D.C., 1947–                                                                                          |
| FOTL              | Forms of Old Testament Literature                                                                                                       |
| <i>FP</i>         | <i>Freud and Philosophy</i> by P. Ricoeur. New Haven, 1970                                                                              |
| <i>Frg Tg</i>     | <i>Fragmentary Targums</i>                                                                                                              |
| <i>FS</i>         | <i>Figuring the Sacred</i> by P. Ricoeur. Edited by Mark Wallace. Minneapolis, 1995                                                     |
| GKC               | <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A.E. Cowley. 2d. ed. Oxford, 1910                                |
| <i>HALOT</i>      | <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J.J. Stamm. 4 vols. Leiden, 1996 |
| <i>HAR</i>        | <i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>                                                                                                             |
| HCOT              | Historical Commentary on the Old Testament                                                                                              |
| <i>HHS</i>        | <i>Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences</i> by Paul Ricoeur. Edited and translated by John Thompson. Cambridge, 1981                     |
| <i>HTR</i>        | <i>Harvard Theological Review</i>                                                                                                       |
| <i>HUCA</i>       | <i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>                                                                                                      |
| IBC               | Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching                                                                           |
| <i>IDB</i>        | <i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by G. Buttrick. New York: Abingdon, 1962                                      |
| <i>IT</i>         | <i>Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning</i> by P. Ricoeur. Translated by David Pellauer. Fort Worth, 1976        |
| ITC               | International Theological Commentary                                                                                                    |
| <i>JAAR</i>       | <i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>                                                                                      |
| <i>JBL</i>        | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>                                                                                                   |
| <i>JBQ</i>        | <i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>                                                                                                           |
| <i>JNSL</i>       | <i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>                                                                                           |
| Joüon             | Joüon, P. <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> . Translated and edited by T. Muraoka. 2 vols. Subsidia biblica 14/1–2. Rome, 1991        |
| JPSTC             | The JPS Torah Commentary                                                                                                                |
| <i>JSOT</i>       | <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>                                                                                       |
| LCL               | Loeb Classical Library                                                                                                                  |
| LLP               | Library of Living Philosophers                                                                                                          |

|                          |                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>LTJ</i>               | <i>Lutheran Theological Journal</i>                                                                                   |
| LXX                      | Septuagint                                                                                                            |
| <i>m. Ned.</i>           | Mishnah, Tractate Nedarim                                                                                             |
| <i>Mek.</i>              | <i>Mekilta</i>                                                                                                        |
| <i>MHF</i>               | <i>Memory, History, and Forgetting</i> by P. Ricoeur. Chicago: 2004                                                   |
| MT                       | Masoretic Text                                                                                                        |
| NASB                     | New American Standard Bible                                                                                           |
| NCB                      | New Century Bible                                                                                                     |
| NCBC                     | New Cambridge Bible Commentary                                                                                        |
| <i>NIB</i>               | <i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>                                                                                    |
| NIBCOT                   | New International Bible Commentary on the Old Testament                                                               |
| NICOT                    | The New International Commentary on the Old Testament                                                                 |
| NIV                      | New International Version                                                                                             |
| NJPS                     | <i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>                  |
| NKJV                     | New King James Version                                                                                                |
| Nfmg.                    | Neofiti Marginal Gloss                                                                                                |
| <i>NPNF</i> <sup>1</sup> | <i>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1. Edited by P. Schaff. Grand Rapids, 1978–79                      |
| <i>NPNF</i> <sup>2</sup> | <i>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 2. Edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace. 14 vols. Grand Rapids, 1978–79 |
| NRSV                     | New Revised Standard Version                                                                                          |
| <i>NTS</i>               | <i>New Testament Studies</i>                                                                                          |
| <i>OA</i>                | <i>Oneself as Another</i> by P. Ricoeur. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago, 1992                                 |
| OBT                      | Overtures to Biblical Theology                                                                                        |
| OTL                      | Old Testament Library                                                                                                 |
| <i>OTS</i>               | <i>Old Testament Studies</i>                                                                                          |
| <i>PDI</i>               | <i>Philippine Daily Inquirer</i>                                                                                      |
| Phils.                   | Philippines                                                                                                           |
| <i>PhilSocRev</i>        | <i>Philippine Sociological Review</i>                                                                                 |
| <i>PhilSocSciRev</i>     | <i>Philippine Social Sciences Review</i>                                                                              |
| <i>PhilStar</i>          | <i>Philippine Star</i>                                                                                                |
| <i>PhilStud</i>          | <i>Philippine Studies</i>                                                                                             |
| <i>PPR</i> (Hahn)        | <i>The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur</i> . Edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn. Chicago, 1995                                     |
| <i>PPR</i> (Reagan)      | <i>The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur</i> . Edited by Charles Reagan. Boston: Beacon, 1978                                |

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>RB</i>        | <i>Revue biblique</i>                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>RHPR</i>      | <i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>                                                                                                                         |
| <i>RM</i>        | <i>Rule of Metaphor</i> by P. Ricoeur. Translated by Robert Czerny. Toronto, 1977                                                                                             |
| Sam. Pent.       | Samaritan Pentateuch                                                                                                                                                          |
| SC               | Sources chrétiennes                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>SE</i>        | <i>Symbolism of Evil</i> by P. Ricoeur. Translated by Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon, 1969                                                                                  |
| <i>SEAJT</i>     | <i>Southeast Asia Journal of Theology</i>                                                                                                                                     |
| <i>Sojourn</i>   | <i>Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia</i>                                                                                                                    |
| Sym.             | Symmachus                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Syr.             | Syriac                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>TDOT</i>      | <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J.T. Willis, G.W. Bromiley, and D.E. Green. Grand Rapids, 1974– |
| <i>Tg Jon.</i>   | <i>Targum Jonathan</i>                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Tg Neof.</i>  | <i>Targum Neofiti I</i>                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Tg Onq.</i>   | <i>Targum Onqelos</i>                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>Tg Ps.-J.</i> | <i>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</i>                                                                                                                                                 |
| Theod.           | Theodotion                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>TLZ</i>       | <i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>TN</i>        | <i>Time and Narrative</i> by P. Ricoeur. Translated by K. Mclaughlin and D. Pellauer. 3 vols. Chicago, 1984                                                                   |
| <i>TS</i>        | <i>Theological Studies</i>                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>VT</i>        | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>                                                                                                                                                      |
| Vulg.            | Vulgate                                                                                                                                                                       |
| WBC              | Word Biblical Commentary                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>y. Ned.</i>   | Palestinian Talmud ( <i>Yerushalmi</i> ), Tractate Nedarim                                                                                                                    |
| <i>ZAW</i>       | <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>                                                                                                                     |



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This study explores several interlocking problems, ranging from the general to the specific. At the broadest level, there is the problem of the ethical significance of First Testament<sup>1</sup> narratives. How can First Testament narratives, which are often ethically ambiguous, be appropriated for ethical purposes? Within this broad genre are narratives that portray God in an ethically problematic light, particularly as one involved in actions that threaten life in what seems to be unfair, arbitrary, or contradictory ways. The issue then revolves around how these narrative texts can be ethically significant when they are so problematic.

One of these puzzling texts is Exod 4:24–26. The problems of this text have been cited repeatedly,<sup>2</sup> but no consensus has been reached regarding their solution. Moreover, since the normal ethical expectations of the reader are subverted in this passage, it becomes difficult to appropriate it ethically. The goal of this investigation is not to solve all the problems, but to suggest a way by which this text can be read coherently and its ethical possibilities explored through the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur. I will argue that Exod 4:24–26 belongs to the larger unit of Exod 4:18–26. I will thus take Exod 4:18–26 as the primary unit for interpretation, although Exod 2:23–4:31 will be taken as the narrative context of the unit.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I will use the term First Testament instead of Old Testament in this work. First Testament does not give the impression of being inferior and antiquated and, at the same time, shows a connection with the Second (New) Testament. See John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 15.

<sup>2</sup> There is the problem of referents for the pronouns in the passage: Whom did Yahweh seek to kill? Whose “feet” were involved? To whom did Zipporah say: “You are a bridegroom of blood to me”? Then there is the question of the meaning of the obscure phrase “bridegroom of blood” and its repetition in v. 26. Aside from these linguistic issues is the theological problem of the reason for Yahweh’s attack.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 93–96 for a discussion.

## APPROACHES TO THE ETHICS OF FIRST TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

There are various ways in which the ethical significance of First Testament narratives has been construed. The most prevalent is that of the ethical model approach, in which biblical characters are presented as good or bad examples of ethical behavior. The attitude or virtue being advocated is often distilled into one principle or moral that Christians can follow.<sup>4</sup> Much of popular devotional literature and Sunday school teaching uses this approach and it usually accompanies a Christian's first encounter with First Testament stories. However, as soon as the reader begins to read the Bible more systematically and thus gets a fuller picture of the story, she or he becomes disappointed,<sup>5</sup> since biblical characters do not always act consistently with the virtues attributed to them. Moreover, the narrator often does not provide an explicit ethical evaluation of the characters' actions and this makes it difficult to determine what virtue or vice is being exemplified. As Goldingay points out, "Who and what in the story has the narrative's own approval?"<sup>6</sup> There are also morally objectionable practices based on our modern values, which are often glossed over in the discussion of the virtues of the characters.<sup>7</sup> The sermons drawn from ethical models are sometimes inspiring, but they are often based on extended generalizations not supported by a close reading of the text.

Another approach is to look at the broad movement—Israel's underlying metanarrative—rather than at a specific narrative text. Bruce Birch uses the different major points in the story of Israel as themes through which he organizes other materials in the First Testament.<sup>8</sup> Birch's work

---

<sup>4</sup> Waldemar Janzen gives an example in *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 55: "Thus, a Sunday school class studying the story of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 2) has not finished its task until the story has led to an abstract maxim, such as 'Help the needy!' At that point, no great loss is felt if the pupils forget the story on their way home, as long as they hold on tightly to the principle 'Help the needy!'"

<sup>5</sup> Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (updated ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 42–43, mentions polygamy, holy war, subordination of women, and excessive nationalism. One can also add to this list slavery, violence, lying, favoritism, elitism, and racism.

<sup>8</sup> Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*. A similar approach is employed by Christopher Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove:

helps readers to grasp the “big picture” of the major themes in the story of Israel, which are rich sources for ethical reflection. However, his use of an overarching narrative scheme leads to the neglect of specific narrative texts. His approach is more thematic than narrational, resulting in the loss of the emotional impact and the kindling of imagination, which are the strengths of the narrative form.

Two writers who concentrate on the ethics of specific narrative texts are Waldemar Janzen and Gordon Wenham.<sup>9</sup> Janzen modifies the ethical model approach. Instead of focusing on the inherent virtues of the characters, he looks at exemplary traits associated with certain roles that the characters demonstrate in a particular incident or story. From particular stories, Janzen abstracts five paradigms that capture Israel’s values and expectations within a given realm of life: familial, priestly, wisdom, royal, and prophetic. Janzen is careful to point out that the model does not lie in the characters themselves, but in how they functioned in a particular story. However, the weakness of Janzen’s approach is that, in his eagerness to fit the story into his particular paradigm, he disregards opposing tendencies in the text. Thus, he is not able to deal adequately with the narrative’s ambiguities and tensions.<sup>10</sup>

Wenham focuses on the ethical stance of the implied author, as this is expressed in ethical expectations higher than what the laws contain (vision), and in the explicit or implicit approval or disapproval of certain behaviors (virtues and vices). He believes that it is possible to determine the moral standpoint of the implied author through the combined use of historical, literary, and rhetorical approaches. He provides three criteria to ascertain that the behavior is regarded as a virtue by the implied author: (1) the behavior is repeated in different contexts; (2) it is set in

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IVP, 1995), although Wright tends to concentrate on the laws and only brings in material from other genres to support and refine what the laws say.

<sup>9</sup> Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*; Gordon Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Janzen (*Old Testament Ethics*, 36–38) reads Judges 19 as an example of the familial paradigm. The Levite, the concubine’s father, and the host exemplify the Israelite ideal of kinship, in that they practiced hospitality. However, there are other indications in the text that express a more negative evaluation of the men: the father’s neglect of his daughter in contrast to his hospitable evaluation of the Levite, the host’s failure to protect the women so that he could fulfill the requirements of hospitality to his male guest, and the Levite’s own disregard for the well-being of his concubine. See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 65–91.

a positive context (e.g., the context of the patriarchal stories is positive, while the book of Judges is negative); and (3) it is reinforced in the legal, psalmic, and wisdom materials. The integrating ethical principle in all these, according to Wenham, is the imitation of God.<sup>11</sup>

Wenham's approach suffers the same difficulties as Janzen's. Wenham's goal is to resolve ethical ambiguities and conflicts in interpretation by ascertaining the viewpoint of the implied author. As he himself admits, however, this is not a straightforward task. The nature of narrative is not tractable to such a simple resolution.

Other authors, along with Wenham, espouse the imitation of God as the basic principle for First Testament Ethics.<sup>12</sup> However, this principle becomes problematic in narrative texts in which God acts in ways that are destructive, puzzling, or seemingly arbitrary.<sup>13</sup> Eryl Davies himself concedes:

There was obviously no problem with the concept of *imitatio Dei* while it was confined to such exemplary characteristics as God's mercy, justice and compassion, but when God's behaviour appeared vindictive, tyrannical and capricious the command to imitate him would inevitably be seen as morally perverse.<sup>14</sup>

Another approach to First Testament narrative ethics is that of John Barton,<sup>15</sup> who draws from the works of Martha Nussbaum, a moral philosopher who uses Greek tragedies and modern novels as points of engagement for ethical reflection.<sup>16</sup> Barton thinks that Nussbaum's

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<sup>11</sup> Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 88–89; 104–107.

<sup>12</sup> See Bruce Birch, "Moral Agency, Community, and the Character of God in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 66 (1994): 23–41; John Barton, "The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 66 (1994): 11–22; Eryl Davies, "Walking in God's Ways: The Concept of *Imitatio Dei* in the Old Testament," in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements* (ed. Edward Ball; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 99–114.

<sup>13</sup> Cyril Rodd in *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 65–76, sees other problems in the "imitation of God" approach. Rodd argues that references to imitating God are sparse in the First Testament, and nowhere is it commanded that one should copy, reproduce, or repeat divine actions. He thinks that the conviction that God is other than a human being discourages such a notion.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, "Concept of *Imitatio Dei*," 113.

<sup>15</sup> John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 19–36, and "Reading for Life: The Use of the Bible in Ethics and the Work of Martha C. Nussbaum," in *The Bible and Ethics: the Second Sheffield Colloquium* (ed. John W. Rogerson, et al.; 2d. ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 66–76.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York:

Aristotelian methodology, with its focus on the particular and the specific, is well suited to the study of First Testament narratives because of the latter's time-bound, particular, and situation-oriented features. This focus on the particular develops ethical perception and practical wisdom, which school people into sensitivity to the complexity of their ethical situations.<sup>17</sup> Thus, according to Barton, "stories can feed our moral life by providing us with visions of how real human beings can live through various crises and trials and remain human."<sup>18</sup>

Nussbaum's approach is different from the prevalent "virtue approach" to First Testament narratives because its emphasis is not the development of moral qualities by following the example of the biblical characters, but rather the growth of ethical perception which is produced as a result of entering into the complexity of the characters' particular situation. This engagement becomes a way of "finding out . . . what possibilities (and tragic impossibilities) life offers to us, what hopes and fears for ourselves it underwrites or subverts."<sup>19</sup> By using Nussbaum's approach, one can see how stories disclose "the possibilities and the problems of being human in God's world."<sup>20</sup>

Like all text-centered approaches, Nussbaum's focus is on the implied author and implied reader.<sup>21</sup> This does not mean that she completely disregards the real reader, for the starting point of her ethical inquiry is the question: how should one live?<sup>22</sup> The question presupposes actual human experience and the goal is praxis not just theory.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, her commitment to particularity does not extend to the particularity of the readers' social location. Thus, in her interpretation

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Oxford University Press, 1990); *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 15–18.

<sup>18</sup> Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 171.

<sup>20</sup> John Barton, "Disclosing Human Possibilities: Revelation and Biblical Stories," in *Revelation and Story* (ed. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 54. However, Nussbaum herself, as William Dyrness points out (written comments), believes that reference to the transcendent can be an escape from facing human ethical dilemmas. See Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," in *Love's Knowledge*, 365–91.

<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 8–9. Her concern is "with intentions and thoughts that are realized in the text, and that may appropriately be seen in the text, not with other thoughts and feelings the real-life author and reader may find themselves having" (9).

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 173.

of Greek tragedies and modern novels, she presents a conception of life that supports incommensurability, the value of emotion, and the significance of surprise, without adequately evaluating how much of her reading comes from her own presuppositions.

Like Nussbaum, Ricoeur does not see the ethical function of narratives as inculcating virtue, but rather as opening up possibilities for living and for knowing oneself. He contends that following a narrative requires practical wisdom, the act of reflective judgment that operates in writing and reading a narrative. Unlike Nussbaum, however, Ricoeur gives a place to real flesh-and-blood readers in the social world in which they live. Moreover, he clearly sets out how narratives form one's narrative identity, which is crucial to the shaping of one's ethical identity. For this reason, I have chosen Ricoeur as my conversation partner as I explore the ethical possibilities of Exod 4:18–26 for migrant Filipinos and their families.

The history of interpretation of Exod 4:24–26 has been dealt with adequately in many works, so I will not repeat this here.<sup>24</sup> However, I will discuss a segment of the reception history of this text in chap. 5, focusing on its ethical appropriation for Jewish and Christian communities in the first millennium.

### PAUL RICOEUR AND NARRATIVE ETHICS

The present proliferation of studies drawing on the works of Paul Ricoeur shows his considerable influence in diverse fields. His writings have continually explored new avenues of thought, and have influenced not only the field of philosophy, but also that of biblical studies, theology, psychology, linguistics, literary theory, anthropology, and other fields of the human and social sciences. Indeed, as Anthony Thiselton puts it, Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory has a "constructively interdisciplinary character."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Brevard Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1974), 95–98; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; 4 vols.; Kampen: Kok, 1993), 1:439–47; M. J. Oosthuizen, "Some Thoughts on the Interpretation of Exodus 4:24–26," in *Exodus 1–15, Text and Context: Proceedings of the 29th Annual Congress of the Old Testament Society in South Africa (OTSSA)* (ed. J. J. Burden; Pretoria: Old Testament Society of South Africa, 1987), 4–8; Géza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 178–92; Julian Morgenstern, "The 'Bloody Husband' (?) (Exodus 4:24–26) Once Again," *HUCA* 34 (1963): 40–46.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 344.

The implications of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory for biblical hermeneutics have been dealt with extensively in many works, so they will not be repeated here.<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur himself has devoted two works to the subject of biblical hermeneutics,<sup>27</sup> but many of his other essays have implications for the interpretation of Scripture.

In terms of First Testament studies, Ricoeur's influence, although still not substantial, is growing.<sup>28</sup> However, Ricoeur himself showed an early and ongoing interest in employing the Hebrew Scriptures as a basis for his philosophical reflections. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, for example, he drew from the language of confession in the First Testament and its Ancient Near Eastern background in exploring the primary symbols behind defilement, sin, and guilt. In addition, he utilized the biblical accounts of creation, the fall, and the story of Job to develop a theory of myth.<sup>29</sup> Twenty years later, he collaborated with an exegete to produce a book that read biblical texts, both from the perspective of a First Testament specialist and that of a philosopher.<sup>30</sup> However, in between these works, Ricoeur had never ceased drawing on the Hebrew Scriptures in tackling theological and philosophical problems,<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Gregory Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics in Motion: An Analysis and Evaluation of Paul Ricoeur's Contribution to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002); Joseph Putti, *Theology as Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Text Interpretation and Method in Theology* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publication, 1994); James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Alain Thomasset, *Paul Ricoeur, une poétique de la morale: aux fondements d'une éthique, herméneutique et narrative dans une perspective chrétienne* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996); Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 6; 2d. ed.; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 29–148, hereafter cited as BH; *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Lewis S. Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

<sup>28</sup> While Brevard Childs dismisses Ricoeur's approach as being incompatible with his canonical theology, others such as James Barr see potential in Ricoeur's hermeneutics for illuminating the biblical text. Ricoeur's thought significantly informs the work of Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*. See Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 96–99; Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 103; Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). See also Brueggemann's *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 2–4, for references to Ricoeur.

<sup>29</sup> *The Symbolism of Evil* (trans. Emerson Buchanan; Boston: Beacon, 1969), hereafter cited as SE. Cf. John W. Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation* (BZAW 134; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 128–89.

<sup>30</sup> André Lacocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (trans. David Pellauer; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, "On the Exegesis of Genesis 1:1–2:4a," in *Figuring the Sacred*:

although he was careful to keep his theological works separate from his philosophical works. Thus, it is not surprising that scholars have employed Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory in understanding the First Testament book of Job.<sup>32</sup>

However, despite having a sophisticated theory of narrative ethics and a theological bent, Ricoeur has not applied his theory directly to an ethical reading of First Testament narratives. Moreover, scholars writing in the area of First Testament Ethics have not utilized Ricoeur's theory. Part of the reason for this, perhaps, is that Ricoeur's insights are sometimes buried under the denseness of detailed arguments, and so it takes some effort to mine the gems from the mass of materials.

One writer, Theo Hettema, has attempted to use Ricoeur's thoughts in interpreting First Testament narratives.<sup>33</sup> Hettema provides a good summary of Ricoeur's narrative theory and its philosophical underpinnings. However, he fails to draw out its implications, resulting in a repetitive summary rather than a creative synthesis that would lead to the productive use of Ricoeur's ideas. Moreover, his starting question is not clear and he aims at too many directions all at once, without any unifying theme that could provide concrete ways of ethically appropriating a specific biblical text.

The lack of synthesis and integration becomes evident when Hettema comes to the interpretation of the Joseph narrative. After an in-depth and extensive view of Ricoeur's hermeneutics and narrative theory, it is disappointing to see them underutilized in the actual reading of the story itself. The literary analysis that Hettema provides could have been done without Ricoeur. The reading is flat and uninspiring, lacking the dynamism and dialectical movement that is inherent in Ricoeur's notion of emplotment. Moreover, since Hettema does not put forward an actual reader of the text, it is not clear whose experiences are being shaped ethically. In his theory of narrative, Ricoeur gives importance to the world in front of the text, in terms of the readers' preunderstanding and appropriation of the narrative. Although Hettema mentions

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*Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (ed. Mark Wallace; trans. David Pellauer; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 129–43, hereafter cited as *FS*.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas F. Dailey, *The Repentant Job: A Ricoeurian Icon for Biblical Theology* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994); John Dominic Crossan, ed., *The Book of Job and Ricoeur's Hermeneutics* (*Semeia* 19; Society of Biblical Literature, 1981).

<sup>33</sup> Theo Hettema, *Reading for Good: Narrative Theology and Ethics in the Joseph Story from the Perspective of Ricoeur's Hermeneutics* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996).



these in his summary of Ricoeur, they do not play a part in his actual reading.

Thus, in chap. 2 of this study, I will seek to set out in a systematic and integrative way the narrative hermeneutics and ethics of Ricoeur, with a view to developing a framework for an ethical reading of First Testament narratives. I will then use this framework for understanding Exod 4:18–26 and appropriating it ethically for the Filipino reader.

#### OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER CONTENTS

In chap. 2, I will give an overview of Ricoeur's narrative theory and its relation to ethics. I will first discuss his ideas of metaphor and symbol as a precursor to the development of his narrative theory. I will then expound his theory of narrative, focusing specifically on the operation of emplotment, which Ricoeur sees as a movement of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. The theory of narrative will be linked to Ricoeur's notion of personal identity, narrative identity, and ethical identity.

The movement of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration will inform the rest of the chapters. In chap. 3, I will identify the prefigured actions of Exod 4:18–26 in the world of the First Testament and in the world of Filipino readers. In chap. 4, I will trace the configurations of the text within its narrative unit, according to Ricoeur's notion of discordant concordance and the synthesis of the heterogeneous. I will argue in this section that Exod 4:18–26 should be read as a liminal experience, leading to a new identity, status, and community not only for Moses, but also for his whole family. In chap. 5, the refiguration stage, I will connect the action of migration and the experience of liminality with the lived context of Filipino migrants who are grappling with issues of identity, marginality, and return migration. I will then put my Filipino reading in interaction with the readings of various Jewish and Christian communities in the first millennium, to show how a change in horizons affects the text's ethical possibilities. In chap. 6, I will conclude by suggesting ways for further study, especially in exploring the notion of God's narrative identity.



## CHAPTER TWO

### NARRATIVE AND ETHICS IN PAUL RICOEUR

In this chapter, I lay out the main elements of Ricoeur's theory of narrative and its significance for ethics. First, I trace the development of his thought on narrative from his work on metaphor and symbol. Second, I discuss his notion of emplotment and its implications for narrative ethics. Third, I expound Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity and its role in forming the ethical identity of the self. Then I focus on Ricoeur's views on memory and forgetting and their links to narrative, identity, and ethics. Lastly, I explore the nature of First Testament narratives between history and fiction, using Ricoeur's views on the links, differentiations, and interweaving of these two narrative modes.

#### FROM SYMBOL TO METAPHOR TO NARRATIVE

The best way to situate Ricoeur's narrative theory is to see it as a development of his exploration of the nature of symbols and metaphors.<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur himself sees his three-volume *Time and Narrative*<sup>2</sup> as forming a pair with his earlier book *The Rule of Metaphor*,<sup>3</sup> because both narrative and metaphor belong to "one vast poetic sphere," in that they show the power of poetic language to redescribe, disclose, and refigure reality.<sup>4</sup> With these two works, he groups *The Symbolism of Evil*<sup>5</sup> as part

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<sup>1</sup> See Dan Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 100–36, for an account of this development and its implications for the interpretation of Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> *Time and Narrative* (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer; 3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–88); translation of *Temps et Récit* (Editions du Seuil, 1983), hereafter, cited as *TN*. Ricoeur's works in this chapter will be cited without the name of the author.

<sup>3</sup> *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (trans. Robert Czerny; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), hereafter, cited as *RM*.

<sup>4</sup> *TN* 1:ix–xi.

<sup>5</sup> See chap. 1, n. 29.

of his poetics, which he describes as “an investigation of the multiple modalities of . . . an ordered creation.”<sup>6</sup>

*Symbols: Expressions with Multiple Meanings*

Ricoeur defines symbol as “any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.”<sup>7</sup> In symbol, another meaning is both given and hidden in an immediate meaning.<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur differentiates his understanding of symbol from the broad view of symbol as representing the entire signifying function. Symbols are signs, yes, but they are signs with a double intentionality. They are double- or multiple-meaning expressions, in which the literal and manifest meaning points to a secondary, latent meaning.<sup>9</sup> There is a “surplus of signification” in symbol, which is the residue of the literal signification. This excess of meaning, however, can only be accessed through the primary, literal meaning.<sup>10</sup> However, the relation that connects the first meaning to the second cannot be objectified or fully intellectualized. One is assimilated into what is symbolized as one participates in the movement from the first to the second meaning.<sup>11</sup> “It is by living in the first meaning that I am led by it beyond itself.”<sup>12</sup>

This differentiates symbol from allegory. In allegory, there is a relationship of direct translation between the first and second meaning. Thus, the allegory can be ignored once its equivalence has been explained. This is not so with symbol, where it is impossible to grasp the indirect, secondary meaning without the recognition of the direct, primary meaning. Moreover, the second meaning is not directly translated from the first, but is evoked or suggested by it, and thus is more indirectly accessible.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Intellectual Autobiography,” in Lewis Edwin Hahn, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (LLP 22; Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 14, hereafter, cited as *PPR* (Hahn).

<sup>7</sup> “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (ed. Don Ihde; Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 12–13.

<sup>8</sup> *Freud and Philosophy* (trans. Dennis Savage; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 7, hereafter, cited as *FP*.

<sup>9</sup> *SE*, 14–15; *FP*, 10–13.

<sup>10</sup> *Interpretation Theory* (trans. David Pellaeur; Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 55, hereafter, cited as *IT*.

<sup>11</sup> *SE*, 15–16.

<sup>12</sup> *SE*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *IT*, 56; *SE*, 16.

Ricoeur sees symbols as stemming from three different spheres of human experience: the cosmic, in which symbols are seen as manifestations of the sacred as in the phenomenology of religion; the oneric or psychic, in which symbols are a function of dream production as in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis; and the poetic, in which symbols are the creations of the poet's imagination.<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur emphasizes that these three dimensions are interconnected, so that they "are present in every genuine symbol."<sup>15</sup> "To manifest the 'sacred' on the 'cosmos' and to manifest it in the 'psyche' are the same thing . . . I express myself in expressing the world; I explore my own sacrality in deciphering that of the world."<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the structure of the poetic image is the same as that of dreams and hierophanies or sacred manifestations.<sup>17</sup>

One other characteristic of symbols, which, as Pellauer points out, Ricoeur draws from the works of Mircea Eliade, is the continuity and circular relation among them. Symbols belong to a system of intersignifications so that one symbol leads to another. "[O]ne symbol reveals aspects of others which may not be immediately apparent in those other symbols and in this way each major symbol refers to every other one."<sup>18</sup>

What led Ricoeur to the study of symbols was his exploration of the problem of guilt. He saw the inadequacies of using a phenomenological approach—a reflection on direct lived experience—simply because direct language was not available.<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur believes that self-knowledge cannot be attained directly, but must be mediated by signs and symbols.<sup>20</sup> He says: "I distanced myself from a self-consciousness that would be immediate, direct, and transparent to itself, and pleaded instead for the necessity of a detour by the signs and the works displayed in the cultural world."<sup>21</sup> It is by way of this detour that he embarked on a study of primary symbols used in people's confession of evil in

<sup>14</sup> *SE*, 10–14. See also *IT*, 57–61.

<sup>15</sup> *SE*, 10, cited by David Pellauer, "The Symbol Gave Rise to Thought," in *PPR* (Hahn), 102.

<sup>16</sup> *SE*, 12–13.

<sup>17</sup> *SE*, 14. Ricoeur draws from Mircea Eliade's insight that the sacred cannot be described but can only be glimpsed through its manifestations. These manifestations have a form and structure, but are not exclusively or primarily verbal. See Ricoeur's essay, "Manifestation and Proclamation," in *FS* (see chap. 1, n. 31), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Pellauer, "Symbol to Thought," 102. Cf. *SE*, 152.

<sup>19</sup> *RM*, 316.

<sup>20</sup> "Intellectual Autobiography," 16.

<sup>21</sup> "Intellectual Autobiography," 19.

*The Symbolism of Evil*. He discovered that there was no direct discourse available for understanding the meaning of evil. "Evil—whether the evil one suffers or the evil one commits—is always confessed by means of indirect expressions that are taken from the sphere of everyday experience and which have the remarkable character of analogously designating another experience."<sup>22</sup>

For example, the experience of human fault is expressed in the conceptual language of defilement, sin, and guilt. But behind these concepts are primary symbols: behind defilement is the image of a stain, where evil is seen as a blemish; behind sin are the deviation images of a crooked path, of transgression, and wandering from God's commandments and interdictions, leading to the view of evil as a broken relationship; and behind guilt is the image of a burden, in which evil is interiorized in the conscience.<sup>23</sup>

From these primary symbols, Ricoeur turns to myths that explore the origin and end of evil. By myth, Ricoeur means "a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which a man understands himself in his world."<sup>24</sup> Myths have a symbolic function because they are capable of revealing the bond between human beings and what they believe to be sacred. Nevertheless, they are second-order language, with primary symbols taking a preeminent place since the latter mediate "between the human experience of evil and its narrative interpretation and expressions in myths and their accompanying rituals."<sup>25</sup>

At the end of *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur poses the question how philosophical discourse, with its pure reflection, could appropriate a language that is "symbolic through and through."<sup>26</sup> It is in reflecting on this that Ricoeur saw the role of hermeneutics, for "it is in hermeneutics that the symbol's gift of meaning and the endeavor to understand by

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<sup>22</sup> *FP*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work* (ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart; Boston: Beacon, 1978), 38–41. Hereafter, cited as *PPR* (Reagan). For a fuller discussion of these images, see *SE*, 25–150.

<sup>24</sup> *SE*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Pellauer, "Symbol to Thought," 102.

<sup>26</sup> *SE*, 347.

deciphering are knotted together.”<sup>27</sup> The phenomenon of double- or multiple-meaning expressions necessitates the task of interpretation. “To interpret is to understand a double meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, symbol and interpretation are correlative concepts: “there is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that the plurality of meanings is made manifest.”<sup>29</sup>

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics in *The Symbolism of Evil* still revolved around the issue of unpacking double-meaning expressions by the “art of deciphering indirect meanings.”<sup>30</sup> Hence, interpretation has to do with recovering the fullness of language, the surplus of meaning hidden behind the symbol.<sup>31</sup> At that time, he called this process “restoration of meaning” or the hermeneutics of restoration.<sup>32</sup>

However, his study of Freud expanded his conception of hermeneutics. In psychoanalysis, symbols and myths as manifested by the unconscious are understood to be distorted expressions and illusions, and thus, one interprets them by a reductive approach. Hermeneutics then is an exercise of suspicion.<sup>33</sup> Instead of dropping his previous understanding of hermeneutics, Ricoeur placed this in dialectic relationship with Freud’s reductive interpretation, underscoring “the conflictual structure of the hermeneutical task.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, aside from being mediated by symbols, self-knowledge, according to Ricoeur, “is a striving for truth by means of this inner contest between reductive and recollective interpretation.”<sup>35</sup>

Ricoeur’s dialectical hermeneutics of symbolic language later broadened to a hermeneutics centered on written language and texts. This accompanied his shift from an existential philosophy to a philosophy of language, largely in interaction with structuralism and with Anglo-American linguistic philosophy. *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative* are part of this shift.

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<sup>27</sup> *SE*, 351.

<sup>28</sup> *FP*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> “Existence and Hermeneutics,” 13.

<sup>30</sup> *RM*, 317.

<sup>31</sup> “Intellectual Autobiography,” 20.

<sup>32</sup> *FP*, 28.

<sup>33</sup> *FP*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> *RM*, 318. Thiselton calls this the “hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval,” associating it with the dimensions of explanation and understanding (*New Horizons* [see chap. 1, n. 25], 344).

<sup>35</sup> *RM*, 318.

*Metaphor: Semantic Innovation and Redescription of Reality*

In expounding his theory of metaphor, Ricoeur first of all explains how metaphor is commonly understood in classical rhetoric. Metaphor is seen as an incident of naming, in which the locus of meaning lies in a single word, which is the noun.<sup>36</sup> It is regarded as an act of transposition, in which the noun is borrowed from a different context to take the place of an absent word. Thus, “metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.”<sup>37</sup> This makes metaphor a phenomenon of deviation, borrowing, and substitution. In this theory, metaphor functions mainly as an ornamental and emotive device, as a matter of stylistic choice, or as a way of filling up a word that is lacking in the vocabulary. No new information is added by the metaphor, and in fact, it can be dispensed with if an exhaustive paraphrase can be given.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to the view of classical rhetoric, Ricoeur develops a theory of metaphor that draws from modern semantic theory.<sup>39</sup> First of all, he shows that the primary unit of meaning in a metaphor is not a single word, but the entire sentence. Hence, the phrase “metaphorical statement” is more appropriate than “metaphorical word,” for metaphor is more a function of an unusual predication than of naming.<sup>40</sup> Second, Ricoeur subsumes the “substitution theory” under a tensive or interaction theory. In the latter, the tension does not come from two terms in a statement, but from two opposed interpretations of the statement,<sup>41</sup> one literal, and the other figurative. This tension results from a logical absurdity, or what Ricoeur calls “semantic impertinence,” and this necessitates a “metaphorical twist,” which transforms the contradiction into something meaningful.<sup>42</sup> Third, although the tensive theory provides many insights, Ricoeur thinks that it is incomplete, in that it does not

<sup>36</sup> *RM*, 3, 13–16.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b6–9, quoted by Ricoeur in *RM*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> *RM*, 19–20; 45–46; *IT*, 45–46; *BH* (see chap. 1, n. 27), 75–77.

<sup>39</sup> He particularly draws from Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962); Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), also “Metaphor,” in *EP* 5:284–9; and Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Significant portions of these works and other theoretical works on metaphor are found in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (ed. Mark Johnson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

<sup>40</sup> *RM*, 65; *IT*, 49–50.

<sup>41</sup> *IT*, 50; *BH*, 77–78.

<sup>42</sup> *BH*, 78.



account for the perception of resemblance, a feature of the substitution theory.<sup>43</sup> However, the function of the work of resemblance, according to Ricoeur, is not to provide an image for an idea, but to reduce the shock between two incompatible ideas. "What is at stake in a metaphorical utterance... is the appearance of kinship where ordinary vision does not perceive any relationship."<sup>44</sup> Fifth, it is in the process of "assimilating things which do not go together," that a new meaning springs up.<sup>45</sup> Thus, resolving the semantic dissonance results in a new way of seeing.<sup>46</sup> Metaphors introduce a semantic innovation: "[A] metaphor is an instantaneous creation, a semantic innovation which has no status in already established language and which only exists because of the attribution of an unusual or unexpected predicate."<sup>47</sup> This experience of "seeing-as," in which things that were far apart now appear to be near,<sup>48</sup> is the work of productive imagination.<sup>49</sup>

Contrary then to the view of classical rhetoric that metaphors do not add new information, they actually bring a new meaning into being. They are not mere decorative or emotive devices. This implies that metaphors are irreplaceable; moreover, they are untranslatable.<sup>50</sup> Although they can be paraphrased, the best paraphrase cannot fully capture their surplus of meaning. Their signification can only be perceived and not described.

The suspension of the literal reference in metaphor does not mean that all reference has been abolished. As a form of discourse, metaphor has a reference, but it is a second-level reference, which is "set free" as a result of the suspension of the first-level descriptive, literal reference.<sup>51</sup> Thus, "just as the metaphorical statement captures its sense as metaphorical amidst the ruins of the literal sense, it also achieves

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<sup>43</sup> See *RM*, 173–215.

<sup>44</sup> *IT*, 51.

<sup>45</sup> *BH*, 79.

<sup>46</sup> *RM*, 212–14.

<sup>47</sup> *IT*, 52.

<sup>48</sup> *RM*, 194.

<sup>49</sup> *RM*, 199.

<sup>50</sup> *RM*, 87.

<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur calls this split-reference, a concept which he borrows from Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960). The reference is split in that the different terms in a metaphorical statement continue to refer to literal objects, but the entire metaphorical statement itself refers to a world or another level of reality that becomes accessible only through the abolition of the first-order reference.

its reference upon the ruins of what might be called (in symmetrical fashion) its literal reference."<sup>52</sup> In this lies the metaphor's power of "re-describing" a reality inaccessible to direct description."<sup>53</sup> By not saying "literally what things are, but what they are like," metaphors in an "oblique fashion say what they are."<sup>54</sup> Hence, "being-as" is the correlate of "seeing-as."<sup>55</sup>

Like symbols, metaphors can also function in a chain of networks that provides them with some stability. Since metaphors are an event of discourse, their existence depends on the moment of utterance. By constant use, however, a metaphor becomes part of the range of meanings of a word, becoming trivial and losing its force. Thus, it becomes a "dead" metaphor.<sup>56</sup> However, when metaphors become part of "a whole array of intersignifications," they tend to have staying power. "One metaphor, in effect, calls for another and each one stays alive by conserving its power to evoke the whole network."<sup>57</sup> Here we see the function of root metaphors. Root metaphors are dominant metaphors that have the capacity to pull together, organize, and engender partial and diverse metaphors and thus bring them to some sort of stability.<sup>58</sup>

### *Metaphor and Symbol: Distinctions and Correspondences*

In his essay "Metaphor and Symbol," Ricoeur explains in what ways metaphors and symbols are different, and in what ways they are related. The difference between metaphors and symbols, according to Ricoeur, lies in the sphere of linguistic discourse. Whereas a metaphor is a phenomenon of language and does not exist apart from language, a symbol, although articulated in language, is rooted in something other than language. Symbols are immersed in the depths of human experience and in the structure of the universe. Thus, there is something in them that does not pass completely into language and that "resists linguistic, semantic, or logical transcription."<sup>59</sup> While a metaphor is a free inven-

<sup>52</sup> *RM*, 221.

<sup>53</sup> "On Interpretation," in *Philosophy in France Today* (ed. Alan Montefiore; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 186.

<sup>54</sup> *BH*, 88.

<sup>55</sup> "Intellectual Autobiography," 28; *TN* 1:xi, 80.

<sup>56</sup> *BH*, 93.

<sup>57</sup> *IT*, 64.

<sup>58</sup> *IT*, 64; *BH*, 94.

<sup>59</sup> *IT*, 57.

tion of discourse, a symbol remains bound to the cosmos, in which it is rooted.<sup>60</sup> Although symbols call for speech, they are only significant when they are tied to the element they represent, whether this is a natural object, a certain action or founding event, a geographical space, or a particular time. It is in this sense that symbols are “bound.” “[The] labor of speech and interpretation is not ‘free,’ but rather ‘bound’ by the appearance of the elements and the appearance of the sacred in and through these elements.”<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, metaphors and symbols are related in their semantic element in that both express a “surplus of meaning.” They point to a reality beyond themselves, which cannot be reduced to a philosophical concept. Thus, both share the same dynamic irreducibility.<sup>62</sup> Both also share a double-structure that sets into operation the work of resemblance.

With all these correspondences, there is more to metaphor than to symbol, for metaphor “brings into language the implicit semantics of the symbol.”<sup>63</sup> Because of the non-semantic element of symbols, the work of resemblance tends to become diffused, and to be more assimilated than predicated. In metaphor, the gap between two incompatible ideas is more sharply defined, and thus the work of resemblance, which releases a new meaning in an appearance of kinship between two opposing ideas, is more easily perceived.<sup>64</sup> Metaphor then helps to sharpen and clarify through language what is only implicit in the symbol. It is possible then to use a metaphor to reveal certain aspects of a symbol and to make it explicit through language; yet even though a metaphor can help articulate some of the meanings behind a symbol, it can never exhaust that symbol’s meanings.<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, there is more to a symbol than to a metaphor. A metaphor only has a linguistic element, but a symbol has a two-dimensional structure: a semantic element and a non-semantic one. This non-semantic element, which cannot be completely expressed in language, is the source of the symbol’s power and effectiveness. The power of a metaphor to relate its linguistic reality to the non-linguistic

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<sup>60</sup> *IT*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> “Manifestation and Proclamation,” 53–54.

<sup>62</sup> Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur*, 104.

<sup>63</sup> *IT*, 69.

<sup>64</sup> *IT*, 51, 56.

<sup>65</sup> *IT*, 65.

experience of human beings depends on the double-structure of the symbol.<sup>66</sup>

In chap. 3, I will use Ricoeur's theory of symbol and metaphor to understand the prefigured actions in Exod 4:18–26, particularly the rite of circumcision.

*From Metaphor to Narrative*

Ricoeur sees that the theory of metaphor can be extended to longer works—to texts in general, and to parables and narratives in particular. In the same way that he enriches the theory of symbol and the theory of metaphor by putting them in interaction with each other, he also illuminates the theory of metaphor and the theory of texts through their interface. Both metaphors and texts are forms of discourse. Although both employ the sentence as the locus of meaning, texts are formally lengthier and may be extended to paragraphs, to chapters, to books, while metaphors may be reduced to a word or certain words in a sentence that become the focus of the “metaphorical twist.”<sup>67</sup> Ricoeur believes that “the process of understanding a metaphor is the key for that of understanding larger texts”; in the same way, “it is the understanding of a work as a whole which gives the key to metaphor.”<sup>68</sup>

Ricoeur not only develops a general theory of texts using the metaphorical process, but also looks at specific types of discourse through this process. A parable, for example, is regarded by Ricoeur as “a metaphoric functioning of a narrative,”<sup>69</sup> in which the bearers of the metaphor are not the individual sentences but the entire narrative structure.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the metaphorical tension in parables does not lie between the words in the sentence, or between a literal or metaphorical meaning. It is not found within the narrative text itself, since it is a story that presents ordinary, everyday life. Rather, the tension is between the vision of reality presented by the parable and the reader's familiar and accepted ways of looking at things.<sup>71</sup>

From parables, Ricoeur moves to a general theory of narrative and draws from metaphorical theory. What distinguishes metaphor from

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<sup>66</sup> *IT*, 61.

<sup>67</sup> “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics,” in *PPR* (Reagan), 135–6.

<sup>68</sup> “Metaphor and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” 139.

<sup>69</sup> *BH*, 89.

<sup>70</sup> *BH*, 94.

<sup>71</sup> *BH*, 95–96.

narrative is that the latter has the element of temporality and consists of discourse longer than a sentence. Nevertheless, Ricoeur names several features common to both, which at the same time distinguish them from each other. First, both involve the phenomenon of semantic innovation. Whereas in metaphor the innovation “lies in the producing of a new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution,” in narrative it lies in the synthesis of the heterogeneous by means of the plot, which produces “a new congruence in the organization of events.”<sup>72</sup> Second, in both cases, the phenomenon of semantic innovation is released through the schematizing operation of the productive imagination, which brings together terms and elements that are considered distant. In metaphor, the imagination perceives a resemblance between terms that are incompatible. In narrative, the imagination “grasps” together and integrates diverse and multiple elements into one story through the action of the plot. Thus, there is a different kind of intelligibility involved in understanding metaphors and narratives. One understands a metaphor by grasping the dynamism by which a new meaning emerges from the abolition of the literal meaning of the sentence; one understands a narrative by grasping the operation that unifies into a complete action all the heterogeneous elements involved in human action.<sup>73</sup> Third, both metaphor and narrative (including fictional narratives) have reference and involve a redescription of reality. Metaphorical discourse “brings into language aspects, qualities, and values of reality that lack access to language that is directly descriptive.”<sup>74</sup> In narrative, the problem of metaphorical reference is applied to the sphere of human action in the refiguration stage, in which narrative reconfigures the human experience of time.<sup>75</sup> In the next section, these features of narrative will be highlighted.

#### NARRATIVE EMPLOTMENT AND ETHICAL POSSIBILITIES

All narratives, whether historical or fictional, exhibit the characteristic of emplotment.<sup>76</sup> This is Ricoeur’s main contention in his three-volume opus *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur carefully differentiates emplotment (*mise*

<sup>72</sup> *TN* 1:ix.

<sup>73</sup> *TN* 1:x; “On Interpretation,” 183.

<sup>74</sup> *TN* 1:xi.

<sup>75</sup> *TN* 1:xi.

<sup>76</sup> *TN* 1:32, 35, 38.

*en intrigue*, putting-into-the-form-of-a-plot) from plot (*intrigue*).<sup>77</sup> Emplotment goes beyond the passive sense of a “system,” which is how plot is understood. It is a dynamic and active process of organizing things into a system. Thus, emplotment is not a static arrangement of the parts that make up the whole, but an integrating process of selection and arrangement of the events and actions into a whole.

*Emplotment: Link between Life and Text*

*Emplotment and Mimesis*

Ricoeur uses Aristotle’s idea of *muthos* as a starting point to explain the concept of emplotment.<sup>78</sup> Aristotle’s idea of *muthos* is closely tied to the concept of mimetic activity (*mimesis*), both terms of which he defines in the context of tragedy. *Muthos*, according to Aristotle, is “the construction of events” or “the organization of events.”<sup>79</sup> *Mimesis*, on the other hand, is the imitation or representation of an action.<sup>80</sup> *Muthos* is “the working of mimesis, that is, the act of composing, bringing together, and arranging the incidents into a unique and complete action.”<sup>81</sup> Both *muthos* and *mimesis* revolve around action (*praxis*).<sup>82</sup> It is human action that is being represented or imitated, not human beings, and this representation is done by means of the organization of events through emplotment.<sup>83</sup>

Ricoeur emphasizes that for Aristotle *mimesis* is not an exact replica or a “redoubling of presence” but a “creative imitation, by means of the plot of lived temporal experience.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, Aristotle moves away from the Platonic idea of *mimesis* as a weakened presence, and replaces

<sup>77</sup> “On Interpretation,” 177.

<sup>78</sup> Aristotle in *Poetics* sees *muthos* as only one of the components of the tragic genre, although *muthos* is tragedy’s most important component (1450a1–10, 1450a38–39, 1450b21–24). Ricoeur expands Aristotle’s narrow categorization and applies the activity of emplotment to all narratives, whether they are historical or fictional narratives.

<sup>79</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a3–4, 15, 32. The phrase “the organization of events” is the one used in *Time and Narrative*.

<sup>80</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b24, 1450a2–3.

<sup>81</sup> “Mimesis and Representation,” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (ed. Mario Valdés; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 138.

<sup>82</sup> James Fodor, “The Tragic Face of Narrative Judgment: Christian Reflections on Paul Ricoeur’s Theory of Narrative,” in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation* (ed. Mornay Joy; Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), 155.

<sup>83</sup> *TN* 1:37.

<sup>84</sup> *TN* 1:31, 34, 45.

it with the idea of an augmented presence.<sup>85</sup> There is a break with preexisting reality that opens space for invention. One does not speak of things, but of quasi-things. Yet since mimesis has to do with human action (*praxis*), and action belongs to the domain of the practical as well as to the domain of the creative, there is the idea of connection as well, and not just of rupture between the creative inventions of the text and the field of practical experience.<sup>86</sup> Mimesis is to be understood not in a passive sense of “representation” or “imitation,” but in an active sense of “the process of imitating or representing something.” The adjective “poetic” (*poesis*) expresses this dynamic sense, since it refers to the activity of artful composition, and not to the parts of the poetic work itself.<sup>87</sup>

### *The Mediating Function of the Plot*

The plot traditionally has been understood as a static closed system identified with the configurations of a text. Literary critics using formalist approaches speak of a plot line or a plot structure where events follow a certain discernible sequence. The same idea of a closed system is found in semiotics, where only the internal laws at work in the text are considered relevant.<sup>88</sup> This presupposition of a closed system prevents formalist and semiotic studies from venturing outside the text to address issues of life and ethics. As a result, these literary studies, although interesting, can become purely descriptive and analytical, failing to address questions of religious-ethical significance.<sup>89</sup>

Ricoeur disagrees with the notion that the text has nothing at all to do with the outside world. The idea of emplotment as a dynamic process, which operates in the realm of human action, shows its connection to the world outside the text. Thus, Ricoeur insists on the mediating role of the plot in the entire mimetic process: “This mediating function

<sup>85</sup> *TN* 1:45, 80.

<sup>86</sup> *TN* 1:45–46.

<sup>87</sup> *TN* 1:33, 48. See also “Life in Quest of a Narrative,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (ed. David Wood; London: Routledge, 1991), 21. Ricoeur defines poetics as “that discipline which deals with the laws of composition that are added to discourse as such in order to form of it a text which can stand as a narrative, a poem, or an essay” (“On Interpretation,” 177).

<sup>88</sup> “Mimesis, and Representation” 139–40. For a discussion of Ricoeur’s critique of structuralism, see n. 378 below.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Brevard Childs’s critique of literary approaches in *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 20. See also John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 39.

derives from the dynamic character of the operation that has led us to prefer the term emplotment to that of plot and ordering to that of a system.”<sup>90</sup>

The plot’s mediating activity can be described as a synthesis of the heterogeneous, hence producing a concordance out of discordance.<sup>91</sup> There are several levels in which this synthesizing activity takes places. First, a plot mediates between the individual incidents and the story as a whole. It integrates the multiple incidents and transforms them into one story. An incident is no longer just a single occurrence but an event that contributes to the progress of the whole narrative. In the same way, a story is not just an enumeration of incidents, but also an organization of events that form an intelligible whole. Second, a plot mediates between discordant heterogeneous factors and makes them into a concordant whole. A story consists of diverse elements such as surprises, discoveries, reversals, agents, means, interactions, encounters, etc. which are woven together. Lastly, a plot mediates between the chronological aspects of time and its configurational dimensions,<sup>92</sup> between time as passage (that which passes and flows away) and time as duration (that which endures and remains).<sup>93</sup>

If the plot were only a static structure residing in the text itself, then the idea of mimesis would be confined to the creative inventive aspect. But Ricoeur’s conception of plot as mediating between lived experience and discourse implies that mimesis is more polysemic than has been commonly understood. Ricoeur expresses this polysemy in terms of a threefold mimesis.

*Emplotment as an Operation: The Threefold Mimesis*

Following the idea of the plot as a closed internal system, the traditional understanding of mimesis has been that of an artificial fabrication and production (the realm of *poesis*), with no connection to the outside world. This is seen in Aristotle’s interest in “mimesis as inventive” in the *Poetics*.<sup>94</sup> The inventive aspect, the textual configuration, is the place where creation takes place in the poetic text. This Ricoeur calls *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>90</sup> *TN* 1:65.

<sup>91</sup> “Life in Quest,” 21.

<sup>92</sup> See *TN* 1:65–67; “Life in Quest,” 21–22; “Mimesis and Representation,” 145–46.

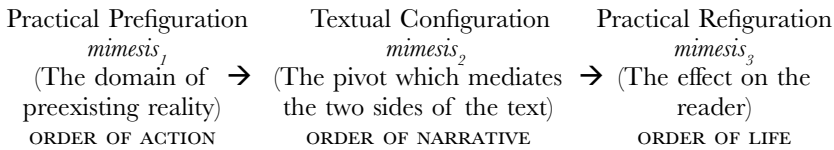
<sup>93</sup> “Life in Quest,” 22.

<sup>94</sup> *TN* 1:51.



However, Ricoeur argues that there are indications in Aristotle, although fragmentary, that point to two other sides of the mimesis of invention. The notion of mimesis as a process of representing the practical field (*mimesis praxeos*) shows another side to the poetic composition, the side of the real domain, which Ricoeur calls *mimesis<sub>1</sub>*. And even though Aristotle's *Poetics* shows no explicit interest in the reader, it does mention something about the pleasure or effect which properly belongs to tragedy.<sup>95</sup> Emplotment is an operation that is completed only in the reader or spectator, in the receiver of the narrated story.<sup>96</sup> Thus, Ricoeur posits another side to mimesis,<sub>2</sub> which refers to the effect of the poetic text on the reader; this he calls *mimesis<sub>3</sub>*.<sup>97</sup> Between mimesis<sub>1</sub> and mimesis<sub>3</sub> is mimesis<sub>2</sub>, which is the pivot that transfigures one side of the text into the other by its configuring function.<sup>98</sup>

The threefold mimesis can be diagrammed as follows:



Although each of the three moments is distinct in itself, each is part of a whole continuous movement.<sup>99</sup> Thus, mimetic activity "leads us from one side of the text to the other through the power of refiguration."<sup>100</sup> It "begins in life, is invested in the text, then returns to life."<sup>101</sup> Narrative receives its full meaning only when it returns to the field of action and suffering.<sup>102</sup>

The strength of Ricoeur's model is that it emphasizes both the links and the breaks between life and a narrative text. He shows their continuity, but he does not fuse them together. On one hand, a narrative text is not the exact replica of pre-existing reality, but a creative imitation, an augmentation of the practical field. On the other hand, it is not totally divorced from the practical field either, but is linked to

<sup>95</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452b30, 1453b11, as discussed in *TN* 1:48–50.

<sup>96</sup> "Life in Quest," 21, 26.

<sup>97</sup> *TN* 1:46.

<sup>98</sup> "Mimesis and Representation," 139.

<sup>99</sup> "Mimesis and Representation," 150.

<sup>100</sup> *TN* 1:46.

<sup>101</sup> "Mimesis and Representation," 151.

<sup>102</sup> *TN* 1:70–71.

it in various ways. The idea of a narrative text as a pivot and mediation highlights its crucial role in enlarging our vision and deepening our understanding of reality.

*Emplotment: Implications for Narrative Ethics*

The linking of preceding praxis (the real world of living, acting, and suffering) with subsequent praxis (the world of the reader) through the mediating praxis of a configured narrative text brings poetics into the realm of ethics.<sup>103</sup> “With narrative,” says Vanhoozer, “poetics approaches ethics, for what the narrative redescribes is the world of human action.”<sup>104</sup> Fodor makes the same connection: “By virtue of its double allegiance to the realm of the real and the domain of the imaginary, praxis establishes a certain continuity between ethics and poetics.”<sup>105</sup>

The process starts from the practical field of experience from which the text draws its implicit ethical categorizations.<sup>106</sup> A preunderstanding of the order of action—its structural features, its symbolic mediations, and its temporal elements—is brought into the text.<sup>107</sup> The process ends in the practical experience of readers onto whom the text projects its work.<sup>108</sup> A postunderstanding of the same order of action is brought back into the world of the reader. This postunderstanding of the order of action, however, is not the same as that of preunderstanding. Mimesis<sub>2</sub> does more than restore to mimesis<sub>3</sub> what is taken from mimesis<sub>1</sub>, so that a vicious circle is perpetuated.<sup>109</sup> Rather, what is prefigured in the first stage and configured in the second is transfigured in the third.<sup>110</sup> Thus, instead of a circle, one must think instead of a spiral which passes the same point several times but at different altitudes.<sup>111</sup>

The idea of a narrative text as a pivot, as having a mediating function, makes it possible for it to have discontinuity and continuity with the realm of ethics, the world of practical experience. On one hand,

<sup>103</sup> Fodor, “Tragic Face,” 156.

<sup>104</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90.

<sup>105</sup> Fodor, “Tragic Face,” 156.

<sup>106</sup> *TN* 1:47–48.

<sup>107</sup> *TN* 1:54, 64.

<sup>108</sup> *TN* 1:47.

<sup>109</sup> *TN* 1:70–71; 74.

<sup>110</sup> “Mimesis and Representation,” 150.

<sup>111</sup> *TN* 1:72.

a text is a creative invention, so that there is a break with practical experience. A narrative text is not an exact replica, and certainly not a weakened form of pre-existing things. It is a work of productive imagination, which orders incidents into a plot. On the other hand, a text draws from and is projected onto the realm of practical experience, hence its continuity with it.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, a narrative text also has to do with action, although “not actual, ethical doing, rather fictive and poetic doing.”<sup>113</sup> It is this quality of a narrative text to be both a rupture and a link with practical experience that gives it a powerful edge in molding and transforming people’s actions. The link makes it possible for actions in a story to be recognizable, but the break opens the way for the exploration of other possibilities by which action and reality can be construed. Ricoeur uses the term “iconic augmentation” to refer to this capacity of symbolic art forms, of metaphors, of poetic texts, and of narratives to expand our vision of the world and our horizon of existence through a second-order reference.<sup>114</sup> Reference to the ordinary and literal world (first-order reference) is suspended in order to make way for a redescription of the world in a more meaningful way (second-order reference).<sup>115</sup> According to Ricoeur, “literary texts depict reality by augmenting it with meanings that themselves depend upon the virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination, so strikingly illustrated by emplotment.”<sup>116</sup>

### *The Transfiguration of Action*

The theory of human action is a recurring theme in Ricoeur, particularly in relation to texts.<sup>117</sup> In *Time and Narrative*, however, he moves

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<sup>112</sup> This is particularly prominent in fiction. Ricoeur puts it succinctly: “Fiction not only retains the trace of the world of praxis against which it stands out; it also redirects our gaze toward features of experience that it ‘invents,’ that is to say, both discovers and creates” (*TN* 2:76).

<sup>113</sup> *TN* 1:40.

<sup>114</sup> Iconic augmentation is a term used by François Dagonet to characterize the power of images created by a painter to condense, spell out and develop reality, in *Écriture et Iconographie* (Paris: Vrin, 1973). Ricoeur extends the concept of iconic augmentation to poetic works. See *TN* 1:80–81 and “The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality,” in Valdés, *A Ricoeur Reader*, 130–31.

<sup>115</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 91.

<sup>116</sup> *TN* 1:80.

<sup>117</sup> Ricoeur characterizes human action as sharing some of the qualities of a text, so that the methodology for text interpretation can also be applied to the human sciences. Specifically, this involves the dialectic of understanding and explanation, where there is an initial “guess” to construe the text or an action as a whole (understanding) and a

beyond the affinities between text and action, and deals with how a particular type of text, mainly a narrative text, presupposes and transposes action.<sup>118</sup>

As mentioned earlier, a prefiguration of the order of action is part of the whole mimetic process, in terms of mimesis<sub>1</sub>. This preunderstanding is never ethically neutral. According to Ricoeur's assertion, human actions are symbolically mediated in that they are always governed by the norms of a symbolic cultural system. They are therefore evaluated according to a scale of moral preferences, from which they receive different degrees of value. It is this prefigured ethical evaluation of action that is extended to the characters of the narrative, thus endowing them with ethical qualities.<sup>119</sup>

It is in mimesis<sub>2</sub>, however, that the ethical dimension is most clearly evident. The configuring action of the plot (mimesis<sub>2</sub>) gathers together into one action "those ingredients of human action which, in ordinary experience, remain dissimilar and discordant."<sup>120</sup> Like prefigured action, the configured action in the plot is never ethically neutral, for it imposes "on the reader a vision of the world" which "implicitly or explicitly induces a new evaluation of the world and of the reader as well."<sup>121</sup> In fictional works, the plot acts as an imaginary testing ground for different moral conceptions, while in historical works, ethics is implied in one's indebtedness to the people of the past, particularly the victims of oppression.<sup>122</sup> Thus, Ricoeur emphasizes, "narrativity is not denuded of every normative, evaluative, and prescriptive dimension."<sup>123</sup>

Peter Kemp puts into relief the role of imagination in the ethical configuration of action. According to Kemp, ethics as the vision of the good life involves the activity of the imagination, for "if ethics is a

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continuing attempt to validate this construction (explanation). Explanation, however, leads back to understanding. See "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (ed. trans. John B. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 197–221, hereafter cited as *HHS*. See also "Explanation and Understanding: On Some Remarkable Connections among the Theory of the Text, Theory of Action, Theory of History," in *PPR* (Reagan), 149–66. For an overview of Ricoeur's theory of human action, see Charles E. Reagan, "Words and Deeds: The Semantics of Action" in *PPR* (Hahn), 331–45.

<sup>118</sup> *TN* 1:55. See also Reagan, "Words and Deeds," 341.

<sup>119</sup> *TN* 1:58–59.

<sup>120</sup> "On Interpretation," 178.

<sup>121</sup> *TN* 3:249.

<sup>122</sup> "Reply to Peter Kemp," in *PPR* (Hahn), 396. Cf. Kemp's discussion in "Ethics and Narrativity," 378–81, in the same volume.

<sup>123</sup> *TN* 3:249.

vision and not a rule, it consists of intuitive models for action and not of purely abstract principles."<sup>124</sup> Indeed, Ricoeur himself shows how imagination, as expressed in fiction, functions in several ways in relation to human action. First, imagination redescribes action. Through imagination, human beings are able understand and master the multiformity of human action by redescribing it through the "grid of an ordered fiction."<sup>125</sup> However, redescription is still a description of what is already there. Imagination goes beyond this, since its second function is that it projects action. Imagination is the means by which one can "try out" and "play" with different possible actions and practices, compare and evaluate motivations for actions, and explore the limits and powers of one's capacity to act.<sup>126</sup> Thus, imagination has "the general function of developing practical possibilities."<sup>127</sup> Finally, imagination produces the field of "intersubjective action" by generating, identifying, and preserving social and historical ties through "analogical apperception." It is this that makes historical experience possible.<sup>128</sup> Imagination then is crucial to ethics, according to Kemp, because it is through imagination that ethics envisions "wise forms of action and communication and thereby expresses the practical truth of human life."<sup>129</sup>

Nevertheless, it is only in mimesis<sub>3</sub> that narrative's potential for remaking action is fulfilled. The world of the text intervenes in the world of action and gives it a new configuration.<sup>130</sup> The reader, however, is the operator who makes this transfiguration possible. Despite the fact that ethics is already involved in the prefiguration and configuration of action, it is still up to the reader, as the agent and initiator of action, to choose among the thought experiments opened up by the narrative text and to actualize it in the act of reading. On the act of reading "rests the narrative's capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader."<sup>131</sup> Ricoeur expounds: "[R]eading also includes a moment of impetus. This is when reading becomes a provocation to be and to

<sup>124</sup> Kemp, "Ethics and Narrativity," 387–88.

<sup>125</sup> "Imagination in Discourse and Action," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (trans. by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson; Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 176–77.

<sup>126</sup> "Imagination in Discourse," 177.

<sup>127</sup> "Imagination in Discourse," 178.

<sup>128</sup> "Imagination in Discourse," 169, 179–81.

<sup>129</sup> Kemp, "Ethics and Narrativity," 388.

<sup>130</sup> "On Interpretation," 185.

<sup>131</sup> "Life in Quest," 26.

act differently. However, this impetus is transformed into action only through a decision whereby a person says: ‘Here I stand.’”<sup>132</sup> It is when the reader makes this decision that the transfiguration of action becomes complete.

Ricoeur does not engage in ethical analysis of First Testament narrative texts. However, his notions of emplotment and the transfiguration of action in the threefold mimesis do provide conceptual tools by which this analysis can take place. Thus, in approaching First Testament narratives, one may ask the following questions: (1) What elements of human action are prefigured in the text, including their assumed ethical values? (2) How are these elements configured by the text and endowed with an ethical vision? (3) What ethical possibilities open up to the readers of the story? In the following chapters, I will follow Ricoeur’s threefold movement of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration in interpreting Exod 4:18–26 and exploring its ethical possibilities.

### *Narrative Intelligibility and Practical Wisdom*

The configuring act of the plot in “grasping together” diverse elements into a concordant whole requires a different kind of intelligibility, one that is akin to Aristotle’s practical wisdom or *phronesis*.<sup>133</sup> Aristotle sees *phronesis* as a type of reasoning which has to do with the field of action, particularly a reflective deliberation that is aimed toward the good attainable by action. Contrasting it with theoretical and scientific knowledge, he describes practical wisdom as a product of human experience and associates it with moral excellence.<sup>134</sup> Following Aristotle, Ricoeur regards poetic genres, including narrative, as developing *phronetic* or narrative understanding, which, in contrast to theoretical understanding, is a type of moral judgment. Through the mediation of the narrative, which proposes to the imagination thought experiments that link ethical conduct with happiness or misfortune, moral judgment is developed.<sup>135</sup> This narrative judgment is not only cognitive, but also affective, as can be seen in the inclusion of discordant, fearful, and pitiable incidents in the composition of the tragic plot.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>132</sup> *TN* 3:249.

<sup>133</sup> *TN* 1:40–41, 66.

<sup>134</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a25–1145a10.

<sup>135</sup> “Life in Quest,” 22–23.

<sup>136</sup> The discernment of the tragic is related to the catharsis or “purged emotions”

Even though Aristotle sees *phronesis* as focusing on particulars,<sup>137</sup> Ricoeur thinks that a kind of universalization is already involved in the ordering of the plot, where completeness and wholeness is brought about as singular events are given causal connection. "To make up a plot is already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic."<sup>138</sup> Mimetic activity, however, "does not see the universal, it makes it spring forth."<sup>139</sup> This implies that narratives are not to be regarded as illustrations of universal truths, in the sense of a poetic and artistic rendition of a universal principle or truth. Rather, the universal is produced in the process of inventing the plot through an act of creative imagination. Ricoeur relates this operation to an act of judgment.<sup>140</sup> Ricoeur sees affinities between this act of judgment and Kant's reflective judgment (both aesthetic and theological), which involves both the synthetic function of "grasping together" and the reflective function accompanying this act.<sup>141</sup>

The reflective act makes it possible for the plot to have one thought, which is regarded as its point or theme. However, this point is not atemporal, nor does it completely eliminate and overwhelm the discordant features of the narrative.<sup>142</sup> It follows then that, because the theme of the narrative is made through a movement in time and through a synthesis of the heterogeneous, it cannot be reduced to an abstraction or a rule, for this would mean doing away with the narrative's temporal character and its discordant features.<sup>143</sup>

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which are brought about through the representation of the fearful and the pitiable (*TN* 1:44–45).

<sup>137</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b15–24.

<sup>138</sup> *TN* 1:41.

<sup>139</sup> *TN* 1:42.

<sup>140</sup> *TN* 1:66. Along with Louis Mink, who characterizes historical understanding as an act of narrative judgment, Ricoeur sees "narratives as highly organized wholes, requiring a specific act of understanding that takes the nature of a judgment" (*TN* 1:155). Cf. Louis Mink, "The Autonomy of Historical Understanding," in *Philosophical Analysis and History* (ed. William H. Dray; New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 160–92.

<sup>141</sup> *TN* 1:156. The task of a historian, according to Mink, is to comprehend events and hold them together. This overall viewpoint is not a method or a technique, but an act of reflective judgment (Mink, "Autonomy of Historical Understanding," 178–79, cited by Ricoeur, *TN* 1:156).

<sup>142</sup> *TN* 1:67, 72–73.

<sup>143</sup> Along the same lines, Mink says that unlike scientific works whose conclusions can be detached and tested by a logic of confirmation, the conclusions of a historical work are not detachable from the narrative leading to these conclusions, since it is the narrative as a whole which supports these conclusions (*TN* 1:156).

The same narrative intelligibility resulting from the act of emplotment operates on the side of the spectators/readers, in the activity of listening/reading and not just of composing/writing. As spectators and readers perceive “the universal that the plot engenders through its composition,” they experience the pleasure of recognition, which is associated with learning, and the stirring of the tragic emotions of pity and fear, which is a form of discernment. These “moral emotions” are the result of both the work’s composition and the emotional response of the readers/spectators.<sup>144</sup>

The intelligibility of a story is revealed in its capacity to be followed. The “followability” of a story is made possible because the succession of events is transformed into a meaningful whole by the operation of emplotment.<sup>145</sup> In turn, this wholeness comes about because, amidst the reversals and contingencies of events in the story, there is an “end point” or conclusion from whose vantage point the story can be viewed. Thus, to follow a story is to understand how the sequence of actions, consequences, feelings, and thoughts leads to the conclusion. The reader is “pulled forward” by expectations engendered by the developments in the episodes themselves.<sup>146</sup>

The followability of a story also depends on the reader’s recognition of the narrative schema. This schema is the work of the productive imagination, which produces a synthesis between the theme or thought of the story and the intuitive presentation of the story’s heterogeneous elements in the form of narrative paradigms.<sup>147</sup> It is these paradigms that structure the readers’ expectations and help them in following the story.

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<sup>144</sup> *TN* 1:49–50.

<sup>145</sup> Ricoeur draws the idea of followability from W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding* (New York: Schocken, 1968), who argues that historical explanation ultimately proceeds from and is in service of the narrative form. He connects Gallie’s description of a story to the dynamics of emplotment. See *TN* 1:149–51.

<sup>146</sup> *TN* 1:66–67. This does not mean that the reader’s expectations would be fulfilled or that the conclusion would be predictable, since a story is made up of contingencies that can go one way or another. But the conclusion does require an acceptability, so that in looking back one can say that the end demanded the sequence of events which led up to it (*TN* 1:150).

<sup>147</sup> *TN* 1:68, in which Ricoeur draws from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Norman Kemp Smith; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965). Richard James Severson, *Time, Death and Eternity: Reflecting on Augustine’s Confessions in Light of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 1995), 83–84, explains the function of schematism in Kant. See also Kevin Vanhoozer, “Philosophical Antecedents to Ricoeur’s Time and Narrative,” in Wood, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 36–37.



The act of reading exhibits the interplay of sedimentation and innovation, which characterizes tradition. On one hand, sedimentation produces, through a historical process, the paradigms or models by which one can identify the typology of emplotment, whether on the level of genre, narrative plot, or type. On the other hand, innovation makes it possible to experiment and deviate from the paradigms, thus defining a work as a particular work. It is these innovations, the twists and surprises, which keep the narrative interesting and push it toward the conclusion. Such experimentations, however, are based on what is already typical.<sup>148</sup> Understanding a narrative work then requires comprehending how the dynamics of sedimentation and innovation—of the typical and the singular—are operating in the work. “In the act of reading, the receiver plays with the narrative constraints, brings about gaps, takes part in the combat between the novel and the antinovel, and enjoys the pleasure... of the text.”<sup>149</sup>

Thus, following a story requires an intelligence that can apprehend the internal coherence of the story—its narrative schema, and its conjoining of the contingent and the acceptable. “To follow a story constitutes a very sophisticated form of understanding.”<sup>150</sup> The reflective judgment or *phronetic* understanding that operates in the act of writing (the configurational act) also operates in the act of reading (the refigurational act). It is the act of reading which “actualizes the capacity” of the narrative “to be followed,” for it is through reading that the reader takes up again the “act of grasping together,”<sup>151</sup> and in doing so, he or she exercises narrative judgment.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, following Aristotle, develops the notion of *phronesis* in the context of understanding as application. *Phronesis* is the application of knowledge to life; it is moral knowledge operating in a concrete situation, or in Gadamer’s words, “ethical know-how.”<sup>152</sup> Gadamer sees *phronesis* as indispensable for understanding art, among

<sup>148</sup> *TN* 1:68–70, 76; “Life in Quest,” 24–25.

<sup>149</sup> *TN* 1:77.

<sup>150</sup> “On Interpretation,” 178.

<sup>151</sup> *TN* 1:76.

<sup>152</sup> Charles Ringma, *Gadamer’s Dialogical Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), 54–59, citing Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 137; “Phronesis: The Challenge of Practical Wisdom,” in *Phronesis* 1 (1994), 4–5. See also the discussion of *phronesis* in relation to Gadamer in Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur*, 42–44, in which practical wisdom is connected with theological judgment.

other dimensions of human experience, since aesthetic experience does not depend on a rigid application of rules, but operates in the context of play that changes the very person caught up in it.<sup>153</sup> Thus, “participation must do the work of principles and rules,” and this requires practical wisdom—“knowing what a situation calls for in the way of right action.”<sup>154</sup>

### *Appropriation and Self-Understanding*

Ricoeur’s unique contribution is that his analysis of narrative does not center on character but rather on plot; however, he does not conceive of plot as a closed system or configuration limited to mimesis,<sup>155</sup> but plot as a process, which is better expressed by the term *emplotment*. Thus, understanding does not only involve comprehending how the elements of the plot (setting, initial actions, conflict, complications, climax, and resolution) fit and move together, but also understanding how the plot mediates between the lived experience that gave birth to the text and the lived experience of the reader of the text.

Although Ricoeur’s position implies that narratives can shape ethical action, it differs from the views of proponents of narrative ethics such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas.<sup>156</sup> The latter authors stress that human actions and ethical behavior arise from human character; character or virtue in turn is shaped by the metaphors and stories of the community to which one belongs.<sup>156</sup> Ricoeur does not speak of narrative as formative of character or virtue, but of narrative as “an irreducible dimension of self-understanding.”<sup>157</sup> Thus, the ethical function of narratives is not to inculcate in us a certain virtue, but to involve us in exploring ethical possibilities that would lead to greater self-understanding. The self is involved in a continuous search for an intelligible narrative that would piece together the scattered fragments

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<sup>153</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 297–98.

<sup>154</sup> Gerald Bruns, “The Hermeneutical Anarchist: *Phronesis*, Rhetoric, and the Experience of Art,” in *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (ed. Jeff Malpas et al.; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 62–63.

<sup>155</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas, e.g., in *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1974) and *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

<sup>156</sup> Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 75; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204–206.

<sup>157</sup> “Life in Quest,” 30.

and discordances of its own existence.<sup>158</sup> It is in the process of “applying to ourselves the plots that we have received from our culture, and of trying on the different roles assumed by the favourite characters of the stories most dear to us”<sup>159</sup> that we continually broaden our self-understanding (what we can now call our “narrative understanding”) and thus continually reinterpret our narrative identity.

This brings us to Ricoeur’s views on interpretation and appropriation. According to Ricoeur, the act of interpretation is completed only when the meaning of the text is actualized for the present reader.<sup>160</sup> This occurs in the moment of appropriation, when the reader “understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself,”<sup>161</sup> as a result of apprehending the worlds proposed by the text.<sup>162</sup>

Appropriation occurs in the mode of play. First, “the presentation of a world in a work of art...is a playful presentation.”<sup>163</sup> In this playful mode “subjectivity forgets itself” and, in doing so, recognizes something beyond everyday reality—“a future horizon of undecided possibilities.”<sup>164</sup> Second, authors themselves are engaged in play, in that they assume different voices, and identify with various characters or with an omniscient narrator. In this way they disguise themselves, but do not fully disappear.<sup>165</sup> Lastly, in responding to “the author’s subjectivity, submitted to the imaginative variations of his *ego*,” the readers are invited to play and put on similar imaginative variations of their egos. Divesting themselves of their earlier selves, they can put on imaginary selves, and experience a “metamorphosis of reality.”<sup>166</sup>

Ricoeur is careful to emphasize that the act of appropriation is not a simple projection of oneself and one’s prejudices into the text. The

<sup>158</sup> “Life in Quest,” 31–32.

<sup>159</sup> “Life in Quest,” 33.

<sup>160</sup> “Appropriation,” in *HHS*, 185.

<sup>161</sup> “What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” in *HHS*, 158.

<sup>162</sup> According to Ricoeur, “the constitution of the self is contemporaneous with the constitution of meaning” (“What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” 159).

<sup>163</sup> “Appropriation,” 186.

<sup>164</sup> “Appropriation,” 187.

<sup>165</sup> “Appropriation,” 187–89. He argues that the first person narrator and the omniscient narrator is as much an imaginative construct as the characters themselves. Thus, even in works where the narrator completely disappears, or in cases where one can no longer identify the author’s voice, the subjectivity of the author is still present, in that “the very disappearance of the subject is still an imaginative variation of the writer’s *ego*” (188). The death of the author is part of the game that the author plays (189).

<sup>166</sup> “Appropriation,” 189–90.

subject must be submitted to a critique of “false consciousness” (in Marxist language) and a critique of “illusions” (in Freudian language). Moreover, appropriation is not an act of possession, of “taking hold,” but rather an act of relinquishment, of “letting-go.” The reader dispossesses himself or herself of the “narcissistic *ego*” in order to be able to receive “a new mode of being-in-the-world,” a mode of being which is projected by the text itself. This revelation “engenders a new self-understanding,” so that “the self, who emerges from the understanding of the text,” is different from the “ego which claims to precede this understanding.”<sup>167</sup> It is an enlarged self that is constituted by understanding the worlds proposed by the text.<sup>168</sup>

The ethical power of narratives, then, rests in their capacity to provide new possibilities for knowing oneself. It is this new self-understanding that gives the impetus to be and to act differently.

In chap. 5, I will discuss what new possibilities are opened up by Exod 4:18–26 to Filipino migrants, which can lead to their growth in practical wisdom and self-understanding and thus enable them to live and act differently.

#### NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND THE ETHICAL SELF

Ricoeur makes the claim that we cannot understand human life, even our own lives, directly. We need the mediation of signs, symbols, and narrative. “Self-knowledge is an interpretation.”<sup>169</sup> The self is recaptured only “in the expressions of life that objectify it.” It is known only “in the mirror of its objects, of its works, and finally, of its acts” and it “can be recovered only by the detour of a decipherment of the documents of its life.”<sup>170</sup> Narrative is privileged among these works by virtue of its temporal quality and because it deals with the world of human action.<sup>171</sup>

Thus, according to Ricoeur, we attain self-knowledge in the reading of narrative literature. However, the self-knowledge that comes about as a result of narrative understanding is not “the egotistical and narcissistic

<sup>167</sup> “Appropriation,” 190–93.

<sup>168</sup> “Appropriation,” 182.

<sup>169</sup> “Narrative Identity,” in Wood, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 188.

<sup>170</sup> “Existence and Hermeneutics,” 17, 18.

<sup>171</sup> “Narrative Identity,” 188, 198.

ego,” but “the fruit of an examined life.” It is the “cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional,” that open the way for this examined life.<sup>172</sup> Through the imaginative variations opened up by the narrative text, the self is not only able to discern its current state, but also to realize its “ownmost possibilities.”<sup>173</sup>

Certain parallels occur between the life of the self and that of a narrative text, which make possible a dialectic interchange between them. Both have a temporal structure and both are engaged in the “synthesis of the heterogeneous.” It is because the life of the self and a narrative text move through time, and because both of their plots exhibit a “discordant concordance,” that it is possible for the self to be refigured by narrative. At the same time, the self reads the narrative based on its previous refiguration by other narratives. The interaction of the self with the narratives it appropriates enables it to develop a narrative identity.

### *Personal Identity and Narrative Identity*

At the end of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur poses the question whether there is a deeper unity underlying the two narrative modes of history and fiction. His answer is positive: both history and fiction contribute to the formation of a narrative identity.<sup>174</sup> This identity, whether that of an individual or a community, answers the question: “Who did this?” “Who is the agent or the author?” The answer to this question, according to Ricoeur, goes beyond providing the proper name, for one must need to show the basis for the permanence of this name. This name must be seen to be referring to the same self from birth to death, and this is possible only by telling the story of that life, that is, through the use of narrative. Personal identity then is a narrative identity.<sup>175</sup> Narrative identity is the kind of identity human beings acquire through the mediation of a narrative.<sup>176</sup> Ricoeur contends that the concept of narrative identity can help resolve the difficulties arising from the notion of personal identity. The meaning of narrative identity

<sup>172</sup> *TN* 3:247.

<sup>173</sup> The phrase is from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 42.

<sup>174</sup> *TN* 3:248; “Narrative Identity,” 188.

<sup>175</sup> *TN* 3:246.

<sup>176</sup> “Narrative Identity,” 188.

and its relationship to personal identity and ethics is developed further in his book *Oneself as Another*.<sup>177</sup>

### *The Two Meanings of Identity*

The problems in the notion of personal identity arise, according to Ricoeur, because of the failure to distinguish between the two concepts of identity. Identity can mean sameness (*idem*) or selfhood (*ipse*). The first refers to a formal or substantial identity, and answers to the question “what?” The second refers to a temporal identity, and answers to the question “who?”<sup>178</sup> Whereas sameness or *idem*-identity implies that a certain core of the personality remains the same, selfhood or *ipse*-identity includes “change, mutability, within the cohesion of a lifetime.”<sup>179</sup> In addition, selfhood implies otherness, in that there is a dialectic relationship between the self and the other than self. Thus, to think about the self inevitably brings with it the thought of the other, not only in terms of comparison (similar to another), but more so in terms of implication (inasmuch as the other).<sup>180</sup> Selfhood then expresses the changing and dynamic aspect of personal identity that “is not vitiated but validated by time and the Other.”<sup>181</sup>

### *Limitations on the Approaches to the Self*

In the first four chapters of *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur explores different approaches to the problem of the self.<sup>182</sup> The first range of approaches is linguistic in nature (semantics and pragmatics), which looks at the self from the viewpoint of the language of identifying reference (semantics), and from the perspective of the self as a speaking subject in a situation of interlocution (pragmatics as it is expressed

<sup>177</sup> *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), hereafter, cited as *OA*.

<sup>178</sup> “Narrative Identity,” 189, 191; cf. *TN* 3:246.

<sup>179</sup> *TN* 3:246.

<sup>180</sup> *OA*, 2–3.

<sup>181</sup> Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur*, 168.

<sup>182</sup> For a helpful summary of Ricoeur’s arguments in *Oneself as Another*, see Charles Reagan, “Personal Identity,” in *Ricoeur as Another: The Ethics of Subjectivity* (ed. Richard Cohen and James Marsh; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3–31. A more reflective essay, focusing more on narrative identity and subjectivity, is David Rasmussen’s “Rethinking Subjectivity: Narrative Identity and the Self,” 57–69, in the same volume. See also the discussion of Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur*, 160–87.

in speech act theory).<sup>183</sup> The second range deals with approaches that have to do with the philosophy of action, in which the self is viewed as an agent of action.

The referential approach in semantics designates individuals by definite descriptions, proper names, and by indicators such as pronouns (I, you) and deictic terms such as demonstratives (this, that), adverbs of time and place (here, now), and verb tenses (he came, she will come), all used with the intention of designating an individual to the exclusion of others. Persons, however, are individuals with basic particulars: (1) each one possesses a body, with physical attributes; and (2) each has mental characteristics, which are attributed to the same body that remains the same at different times and places.<sup>184</sup> Although providing valuable criteria for identifying persons, this approach has certain limitations, according to Ricoeur. First, it conceptualizes the person only from the point of view of sameness, ignoring the temporal aspect of selfhood.<sup>185</sup> Second, the person is viewed in the third person, as “remaining on the side of the things about which we speak rather than on the side of the speakers themselves who designate themselves in speaking.”<sup>186</sup> At this level of discourse, persons still cannot be considered “selves,” since their self-designative capabilities are not brought into focus.<sup>187</sup> Third, the notion of person is attached to the predicates ascribed to it, shifting the emphasis from the “who” to the “what.” The element of neutrality and the fact that these descriptions retain the same sense, whether attributed to oneself or to others, eclipse the subject. The self then remains hidden and its particular “mineness” is not brought to the forefront.<sup>188</sup>

It would seem that speech act theory,<sup>189</sup> with its focus on utterance—the act of speaking itself—and its emphasis on the “I” who speaks to

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<sup>183</sup> Pragmatics deals with language in a situation context, “in which the meaning of a proposition is dependent on the context of interlocution.” See “The Human Being as the Subject Matter of Philosophy,” in *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur* (ed. T. Peter Kemp and David Rasmussen; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 92.

<sup>184</sup> *OA*, 27–35. See also “Human Being as Subject,” 91.

<sup>185</sup> Rasmussen (“Rethinking Subjectivity,” 60) puts it aptly: “While being able to characterize selfhood by reference to sameness, this view overlooks the particularity associated with the self as an entity living through and within time.”

<sup>186</sup> *OA*, 32.

<sup>187</sup> “Human Being as Subject,” 91.

<sup>188</sup> *OA*, 35–37.

<sup>189</sup> See the discussion of speech act theory on pp. 141–45.

a “you” would make the subject more visible. “[T]he very emphasis on the one who utters would allow for the expression of the self as a unique someone who makes this particular statement as a testament to her identity.”<sup>190</sup> Indeed, the capacity for self-designation is addressed in speech act theory; hence, it can be considered a reflexive approach. The “I” receives a privileged place, since it is no longer just the referent of an identifying reference that shifts depending on the one who is speaking. Here the “I” is anchored on “the one who designates himself or herself in every utterance containing the word ‘I.’”<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, this “I” has an intention of meaning peculiar to the one speaking: “it is the speakers who mean to say this or that, who understand an expression in a particular sense.”<sup>192</sup> Moreover, since the utterance occurs in a situation of interlocution, both the “I” who speaks and the “you” who is addressed are implied, pointing to the importance not only of the self but also of the other.<sup>193</sup> Yet, for all of these advantages, speech act theory still eclipses the subject in some ways. The reason for this, Ricoeur thinks, is that the focus is on the “act,” and not on the agent. The accent is placed on the fact of the utterance and its illocutionary force, so that the spotlight is removed from the one who is speaking. Hence, reflexivity is “assimilated to a subtle kind of reference,”<sup>194</sup> and is subject to the same limitations as the referential approach.

Analytical philosophies of action, on the other hand, try to determine what counts as action among the events in the world by looking at the “why” of action.<sup>195</sup> Since actions belong to a network of intersignifications, so that understanding the meaning of one term makes it possible to understand the other terms in the whole network,<sup>196</sup> it would appear that asking the question “what” and “why” would eventually lead to the “who.” However, in analytic philosophy, the preoccupation with the relationship of the “what” to the “why” leads to the neglect of the relationship of the “what-why” to the “who.”<sup>197</sup> Ricoeur traces

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<sup>190</sup> Rasmussen, “Rethinking Subjectivity,” 60.

<sup>191</sup> *OA*, 45–46.

<sup>192</sup> *OA*, 43.

<sup>193</sup> *OA*, 43.

<sup>194</sup> *OA*, 51.

<sup>195</sup> John van den Hengel, “Can There Be a Science of Action?” in Cohen and Marsh, *Ricoeur as Another*, 71–92, gives a good background and summary of the analytic theory of action expounded by Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*.

<sup>196</sup> *OA*, 56–57.

<sup>197</sup> *OA*, 60, 68, 72, 88.



the various stages on how this “agentless semantics of action” takes place.<sup>198</sup> What these philosophies of action have in common is their focus on explanation, which leads them to lose sight of the temporal element that links different actions together, as well as the agent who “possesses” his or her actions.

In summary, although these different approaches illumine the problem of the person and of human action, they are limited because they lack the temporal dimension of the self. They do not take into account that “the person of whom we are speaking and the agent on whom the action depends have a history.”<sup>199</sup> They also fail to recognize the distinction between identity as sameness, and identity as selfhood,<sup>200</sup> which results in conceptualizing the self only from the angle of sameness. As a result, the object of the identifying reference, the speaking subject of the speech act, the agent of the action, is eclipsed as the focus remains on the individualizing reference, the utterance event, or the explanation for the action.

Through the resources of narrative theory, Ricoeur attempts to recover the temporal dimension of the self and the dialectic of identity as selfhood and as sameness in the constitution of the self.<sup>201</sup>

#### *Time and the Dialectic of Sameness and Selfhood*

The two versions of identity (*idem* and *ipse*) confront each other in the problem of the permanence of time. If identity involves change as well as permanence, what changes and what remains permanent?

Ricoeur discusses the pole of identity as sameness as involving four criteria. The first is numerical identity, which defines identity as uniqueness, so that in several occurrences of a thing, only one and the same thing is involved. Identification is the “reidentification of the same.” Identity here is contrasted to plurality. The second criterion is qualitative identity, which characterizes identity as resemblance so that one thing can be substituted for the other. Identity is contrasted with what is different. Resemblance can act as an indirect criterion for uniqueness, since through the demonstration of material traits that are extremely similar, one can prove that this is the one and only person involved. However, Ricoeur points out that the passage of time creates

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<sup>198</sup> *OA*, 61–87.

<sup>199</sup> *OA*, 113.

<sup>200</sup> *OA*, 114.

<sup>201</sup> Rasmussen, “Rethinking Subjectivity,” 61.

a weakness in the criterion of similarity. How can one be absolutely sure that the same person is involved when time creates havoc in the memory and introduces changes that lead to dissemblance and divergence? Hence, a third criterion is posed in the concept of identity as sameness. This is the uninterrupted continuity of a life, from the first to the last stages of its development. Thus, one needs to demonstrate that the incremental changes, although threatening resemblance, have nevertheless not been able to destroy such resemblance. Identity then is contrasted with discontinuity. At the base of the criteria of similarity and continuity is the fourth criterion for identity, which is permanence in time. Amidst the changes and mutations of life, a substratum is seen to remain constant. This substratum is the structure of relations, the organization of a combinatory system, whose parts may change but whose frame remains the same. In this notion of identity as permanence in time, identity is contrasted with diversity.<sup>202</sup>

There are, however, two models of permanence in time, the second of which does not espouse the notion of an unchanging substance or form. The first model assumes a permanent underlying substance in terms of character, where character “designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized.”<sup>203</sup> Character, however, is an “acquired identification,” in which habits become traits, which then become a lasting disposition. This implies that character is not a static concept; it has a temporal dimension, a history.<sup>204</sup> The temporal element in character means that *idem*-identity is not the only one involved; rather, character shows the overlapping of *ipse* (temporal identity) by *idem* (substantial identity). Here the “what” is superimposed on the “who,” and they are not seen as distinct from each other.<sup>205</sup>

The second model of permanence in time has to do with the keeping of one’s word regardless of changes in time (faithfulness) or self-constancy. Unlike the first model, self-constancy does not presuppose an unchanging core of the self. “To keep a promise is not to remain the same through time but to defy the changes wrought by time.”<sup>206</sup> “[E]ven

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<sup>202</sup> “Narrative Identity,” 189–90; *OA*, 116–17.

<sup>203</sup> *OA*, 121.

<sup>204</sup> Ricoeur likens this to the movement of sedimentation and innovation in tradition, but with sedimentation as predominant. (See p. 33 for the explanation of innovation and sedimentation). Even as the tradition changes, a certain form remains that stabilizes through time and thus can be recognized and reidentified.

<sup>205</sup> *OA*, 122.

<sup>206</sup> Reagan, “Personal Identity,” 14.

if my desire were to change; even if I were to change my opinion or inclination, 'I will hold firm.'"<sup>207</sup> In this second model, sameness-identity and selfhood-identity diverge, becoming opposite poles in relation to the meaning of permanence in time.

Thus, permanence in time as a criterion of identity is expressed in two ways: first, as consistency in character, and second, as constancy of the self. Ricoeur proposes that what mediates between these two models is narrative identity.<sup>208</sup> Narrative identity oscillates between a lower limit, where *idem* and *ipse* coincide, and an upper limit, where *ipse* alone becomes the hallmark of identity.<sup>209</sup> This dialectic is expressed in the movement of the narrative plot, which makes narrative a unique resource for understanding personal identity.

### *The Mediation of Narrative*

The narrative structure provides a way of linking the "who?" to the "what?" and the "why?" because the responses to these questions form a chain that is none other than the story itself. Thus, "telling a story is saying who did what and how, by spreading out in time the connection between these various viewpoints."<sup>210</sup>

Temporality is what distinguishes narrative from other art forms, and from other forms of discourse. If a narrative text is like a painting in that it also gives an augmented view of reality, it is unlike a painting in that the augmented reality that the narrative presents has to do with human time.<sup>211</sup> Time in narrative is not something external. It is the very dynamic that propels the narrative to move forward. "The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world."<sup>212</sup> Thus, the unity among the multiple narrative modes and genres is not only that they exhibit emplotment, but also that their plots mark, organize, and clarify the temporal character of human experience.<sup>213</sup> The temporal structure of narrative makes it an ideal vehicle for expressing the temporal aspect of the self.

<sup>207</sup> *OA*, 124.

<sup>208</sup> *OA*, 115–24.

<sup>209</sup> *OA*, 124.

<sup>210</sup> *OA*, 146.

<sup>211</sup> Vanhoozer ("Philosophical Antecedents," 37) puts it aptly: "Just as a painting is a *visual* representation of reality which shapes or configures *space*, so narrative is a *verbal* representation of reality which shapes or configures *time*."

<sup>212</sup> *TN* 1:3.

<sup>213</sup> Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, 90.

The time element also makes it possible to see changes and variability in the characters of the story, yet at the same time gives a sense of continuity to their stories. "A narrative can link the past with the future by giving a sense of continuity to an ever-changing story of the self."<sup>214</sup> Through the narrative identity of the characters in the plot, sameness and selfhood are emplotted in varied degrees as the story moves through time.

*Narrative Identity and the Mediations of the Plot*

Instead of focusing immediately on the identity of the character, which would have been an obvious starting point for an exploration of personal identity, Ricoeur discusses first the plot's mediation of permanence and change in the dynamic of discordant concordance, since he regards it as key to the character's narrative identity. He asserts, "The narrative identity of the character could only correspond to the discordant concordance of the story itself."<sup>215</sup>

Ricoeur reviews the concept of emplotment elucidated in *Time and Narrative*. The action of the plot shows the dialectic of concordance and of discordance, expressed in the synthesis of the heterogeneous.<sup>216</sup> Within the narrative plot, events are not just occurrences, but they serve the function of necessity and contingency, in that they advance the plot toward its logical conclusion, and yet at the same time, they thwart it in surprising and unexpected ways. Thus "the narrative operation has developed an entirely original concept of dynamic identity which reconciles...identity and diversity."<sup>217</sup> This allows for the integration of diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability with permanence in time, understood in the sense of sameness-identity.<sup>218</sup>

In *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur extends the operation of emplotment to the identity of the characters in the plot, something only alluded to in *Time and Narrative*.<sup>219</sup> After discussing the theoretical basis of the correlation between action and character,<sup>220</sup> Ricoeur shows how the

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<sup>214</sup> Rasmussen, "Rethinking Subjectivity," 62.

<sup>215</sup> "Narrative Identity," 195.

<sup>216</sup> *OA*, 140–42. See also "The Mediating Function of the Plot," pp. 23–24 above.

<sup>217</sup> *OA*, 143.

<sup>218</sup> *OA*, 140.

<sup>219</sup> See *TN* 1:37.

<sup>220</sup> *OA*, 143–47.

dialectic of concordance and discordance operates internally to the character itself.

[F]ollowing the line of concordance, the character draws his or her singularity from the unity of a life considered a temporal totality which is itself singular and distinguished from others. Following the line of discordance, this temporal totality is threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it (encounters, accidents, etc.).<sup>221</sup>

Thus, the identity of the character—its narrative identity—shares in and is understood in terms of this dynamic interplay between discordance and concordance operating in the plot. It is the narrative, as it is told, which constructs this identity. Yet how is this identity, formed by the dialectic of discordant concordance, connected to the dialectic of sameness and selfhood?

In responding to this question, Ricoeur does something similar to his approach in *Time and Narrative*. There he shows how fiction mediates between cosmological time and phenomenological time by engaging in “imaginative variations” that present the relationship of the two in various ways.<sup>222</sup> In the same way, fiction mediates between sameness and selfhood by “thought experiments” that conceive of the relationship between these two modalities in varying degrees. Some works emphasize sameness; others display dissolution of sameness. In some narratives, the identity of the character may be clearly recognizable and consistent. In other works, the discordance may threaten the concordance to such a degree that the identity of the character in terms of sameness becomes incomprehensible, yet there may still be left some form of self-constancy. In some other works, character and self-constancy may no longer be discernible. It is interesting, Ricoeur comments, that in works where there is dissolution of the identity of the character, a corresponding dissolution of the narrative form also occurs.<sup>223</sup>

In chap. 4, we will see how dissolution of identity takes place in Exod 4:18–26 and how this is accompanied by the heightening of the plot’s discordant elements.

<sup>221</sup> *OA*, 147.

<sup>222</sup> See “Refiguration of Time” in pp. 72–74.

<sup>223</sup> *OA*, 149; “Narrative Identity,” 195–96.

*Narrative Identity and Ethical Identity*

Ricoeur's thesis is that narration occupies a middle ground between the descriptive viewpoint of action and the prescriptive viewpoint of ethics; hence, the triad—description, narration, prescription. Thus, narrative has a “double gaze”—it looks “backward in the direction of the practical field, and ahead in the direction of the ethical field.”<sup>224</sup> Narrative provides “a meaningful transition between the ascription of action to an agent who has the capacity to act and its imputation to an agent who has the obligation to act.”<sup>225</sup> The mediating role of narrative, however, is only possible if the practical field is broader than what is covered by current theories of action, and if ethical determinations are already implied in narration.<sup>226</sup>

*Looking Back: Broadening the Notion of Action*

Ricoeur thinks that theories of action have concentrated too much on basic actions, and action chains (those with the relationship of “X in order to do Y”), and have not gone on to deal with how actions are organized into composite and hierarchical units. He believes that the concept of action must be expanded to include practices, life plans, and what MacIntyre calls the “narrative unity of a life.”<sup>227</sup> Practices are “nesting connections,” involving relationships of coordination and subordination. They are governed by constitutive rules, which fix the meaning of a certain gesture within a certain context (e.g., a shift in a pawn's position constitutes a move in a chess game). They also have an interactive character, in that they take account of the actions of others. These interactions consist of overt exchanges such as competition, conflict, and cooperation, but also include the omission of interaction in neglect, endurance, and suffering on the part of others.<sup>228</sup> “Life plans,” on the other hand, are “the vast practical units that make up professional life, family life, leisure time, and so forth.”<sup>229</sup> They constitute the intermediate unit between practices and guiding ideals that orient a life project. All of these are summed up in the narrative unity of a life, that is, in “the gathering together of one's life” in the form of a narrative.

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<sup>224</sup> *OA*, 115.

<sup>225</sup> *OA*, 152.

<sup>226</sup> *OA*, 152, cf. 114–15.

<sup>227</sup> See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 190–209.

<sup>228</sup> *OA*, 152–57.

<sup>229</sup> *OA*, 157.

This narrative unity provides the basis of the ethical aim of a “good” life, since it is only possible to give an ethical character to one’s life if it is gathered together in some way, which can only take the form of a narrative.<sup>230</sup> The notion of narrative unity with “its accent on the organization of intention, causes, and chance”<sup>231</sup> finds its parallel in a narrative text.

Ricoeur, however, is careful to point out the discontinuities between real life and a literary text.<sup>232</sup> In literary fiction, there are three voices—the author, the narrator, and the characters—while in a real life story, these three are collapsed into one. There is a clear beginning and ending in a narrative text (which is not necessarily the beginning or ending of the character’s life), which enables it to be seen as a whole. In contrast, a person cannot see the whole of his or her life and recount it, since one is not a witness to one’s own birth and death. One can weave several plots out of one’s life, while the plot of a narrative text is restricted by the narrative’s internal structure. Narrative fiction’s limited textual world does not show the extent of entanglement that a person’s life has with the histories of others.<sup>233</sup> Nevertheless, this break between literary narratives and life histories, far from being a disadvantage, makes it easier to perceive the connection between action and agent. Thus, “literature proves to be an immense laboratory for thought experiments in which this connection is submitted to an endless number of imaginative variations.”<sup>234</sup>

### *Looking Ahead: Ethical Elements in Narrative*

Ricoeur recapitulates and develops some of the ideas he introduced about narrative and ethics in *Time and Narrative*.<sup>235</sup> He believes that “there is no ethically neutral narrative.”<sup>236</sup> First, at the prefiguration stage, the literary form of a narrative is rooted in the art of storytelling, which revolves around the oral exchange of experiences full of practical wisdom. Even at this stage, evaluation already takes place. Second, even the suspension of moral judgment at the configuration stage, which is

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<sup>230</sup> *OA*, 158. Ethics, as the vision of the “good” life, is a view shared by both Ricoeur and MacIntyre.

<sup>231</sup> *OA*, 178.

<sup>232</sup> On this point, Ricoeur sees himself differing from MacIntyre.

<sup>233</sup> *OA*, 160–61.

<sup>234</sup> *OA*, 159.

<sup>235</sup> See pp. 27–28.

<sup>236</sup> *OA*, 115.

the effect of aesthetics, serves only as a venue for “exploring new ways of evaluating actions and characters.”<sup>237</sup> Thus, “telling a story...is deploying an imaginary space for thought experiments in which moral judgment operates in a hypothetical mode.”<sup>238</sup> The impact of these thought experiments reaches the reader’s feelings and actions in the refiguration stage, resulting in discovery and transformation.<sup>239</sup>

Narrative then is relevant to ethics, yet it has its limits, according to Ricoeur. The limit has to do with the difference between imagination and decision. The narrative opens up a plurality of roles and plots, with which the reader can do thought experiments, trying different models and inhabiting foreign worlds by an act of imagination. There is open-endedness to narrative imagination, which makes narrative identity an unstable and seamless identity. “Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents..., so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives.”<sup>240</sup>

Ethics, on the other hand, calls for a decision of the will, “but this decision cannot be provided by narrative.”<sup>241</sup> The predicates good and obligatory, which are part of the ethical intention, are not derived from the narrative structure itself.<sup>242</sup> Narrative can only provide possibilities for action. It exercises the imagination more than the will.<sup>243</sup> For example, the characters in the Bible (e.g., Abraham presenting his wife as his sister, Jacob cheating his father) are not ethical models but paradigmatic models, in the sense that their actions provide possibilities for dealing with situations. However, as Ricoeur stresses, “you may try different configurations, different ways of plotting character, but when you come to ethics we have to take a stand.”<sup>244</sup>

For this reason, Ricoeur not only links imagination and ethics, but also opposes them. Narrative furnishes ethics with concrete models of evaluation, but the reader will have to choose among them and take a stand.<sup>245</sup> In order to do this, the reader needs the input of non-narrative

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<sup>237</sup> *OA*, 164.

<sup>238</sup> *OA*, 170.

<sup>239</sup> *OA*, 164.

<sup>240</sup> *TN* 3:248.

<sup>241</sup> Hettema, *Reading for Good*, 117.

<sup>242</sup> “Reply to Kemp,” 398.

<sup>243</sup> *TN* 3:249.

<sup>244</sup> Paul Ricoeur, David Pellauer, and John McCarthy, “Conversation,” in *The Whole and Divided Self* (ed. David E. Aune and John McCarthy; New York: Crossroad, 1997), 223.

<sup>245</sup> Ricoeur et al., “Conversation,” 224.



materials in Scripture.<sup>246</sup> Thus the other genres of Scripture—law, wisdom, prophecy, and hymn—also contribute to the formation of the acting subject.<sup>247</sup>

In chap. 5, we will see how the narrative identity of the characters in Exod 4:18–26 can inform the narrative identity of Filipino migrants.

*From Narrative Identity to Ethical Identity*

With the continuities and discontinuities between narrative and ethics, how then does narrative identity pass over to becoming an ethical identity? How do the imaginative variations of narrative, which trigger “estimations, evaluations, and judgments of approval and condemnation,”<sup>248</sup> translate into ethical decision and action?

First, it is important to see how Ricoeur views ethics. Ethics, he shows, is not just about principles and rules for right conduct, but is about the vision of the good life.<sup>249</sup> It is “the wish to live the good life as this is prescribed by practical wisdom, rather than by obedience to duty.”<sup>250</sup> Ricoeur sees ethics as “the *aim* of an accomplished life” (a teleological focus) which is centered on the good. He differentiates it from morality, which is “the articulation of this aim in *norms*” (a deontological focus), centered on what is obligatory. Although he sees the primacy of ethics over morality, he does not discount the importance of the latter, since the ethical aim must pass “through the sieve of the norm.”<sup>251</sup> Morality serves to actualize the ethical aim; yet it is limited, for in situations of irresolvable conflict, morality must again have recourse to the ethical aim.<sup>252</sup> Thus, between ethics and morality, there is a relationship of both subordination and complementarity.<sup>253</sup>

In relation to selfhood, Ricoeur identifies the teleological focus or ethical aim with self-esteem, while the deontological moment, he calls self-respect.<sup>254</sup> Self-esteem is related to our aspirations and the evaluation

<sup>246</sup> *TN* 3:249.

<sup>247</sup> In other works, Ricoeur shows how the meaning of a biblical narrative is affected by its being placed together with other forms of discourse. See “Narrative Theology,” 245–46; “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (see chap. 1, n. 27), 73–118; “Naming God,” in *FS*, 224–28.

<sup>248</sup> *OA*, 115.

<sup>249</sup> Kemp, “Ethics and Narrativity,” 387.

<sup>250</sup> “Reply to Kemp,” 395.

<sup>251</sup> *OA*, 170. The eighth study (*OA*, 203–39) discusses this.

<sup>252</sup> The ninth study (*OA*, 240–96) is devoted to this topic.

<sup>253</sup> *OA*, 170–71.

<sup>254</sup> *OA*, 171.

of our actions and life direction.<sup>255</sup> Through the ethical evaluation of our actions—whether these be in the form of choices affecting our practices, life plans, or life goals—we continually interpret ourselves and assess whether we are worthy of esteem. Thus, “on the ethical plane, self-interpretation becomes self-esteem. In return, self-esteem follows the fate of interpretation.”<sup>256</sup> Self-respect, on the other hand, is related to the moral obligation or duty as it is exercised in moral constraints and universalized in the maxims of the Golden Rule and the Categorical Imperative.<sup>257</sup> “Self-respect is self-esteem under the reign of moral law.”<sup>258</sup>

Ethical identity “requires a person accountable for his or her acts.”<sup>259</sup> To pass over into ethics, actions must not only be ascribed to an agent, but also imputed to an agent. Moral imputation is a kind of judgment, in which persons are held responsible for their actions and their consequences.<sup>260</sup> Such a judgment presupposes that the person is a basic particular, rooted in the corporeality of the human condition, possessing a body to which can be ascribed physical and mental predicates, as the semantics approach emphasizes.<sup>261</sup> It also assumes that the person has the capacity to designate himself or herself, which is the contribution of the pragmatics approach. Furthermore, the person must have the “*power-to-do*, or power to act, the capacity possessed by an agent to constitute himself or herself as the author of action.”<sup>262</sup> Thus, the capacity for self-designation operates on several levels; it indicates “the power to designate oneself as the speaker of one’s own words; the power to designate oneself as the agent of one’s own actions; the power to designate oneself as the protagonist in one’s own life story.”<sup>263</sup> One must be able to “assume narratively the story of his own life” to be able to take responsibility for one’s own actions.<sup>264</sup> Ethical identity then presupposes personality identity as sameness and selfhood. Sameness corresponds to objective features such as a person’s body and mental

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<sup>255</sup> Robert Sweeney, “Ricoeur on Ethics and Narrative” in Joy, *Context and Contestation*, 199.

<sup>256</sup> *OA*, 179; cf. “Human Being as Subject,” 99.

<sup>257</sup> See *OA*, 204–18.

<sup>258</sup> *OA*, 204. Cf. 215.

<sup>259</sup> *OA*, 151.

<sup>260</sup> “Human Being as Subject,” 98.

<sup>261</sup> *OA*, 150–51.

<sup>262</sup> *OA*, 220.

<sup>263</sup> “Reply to Ted Klein,” in *PPR* (Hahn), 367.

<sup>264</sup> “Reply to Kemp,” 397.

attributes, and selfhood corresponds to the capacity of the person to designate himself or herself as the author of words and actions.<sup>265</sup> The interplay between sameness and selfhood constitutes a person's narrative identity.

Through the narrative identity of the characters in the story, as expressed in the dialectic of sameness and selfhood, the self is able to conduct imaginatively mental experiments with various possibilities for action and life, and thus shape its own narrative identity. This narrative identity, however, as mentioned above, is not stable, but is continually configured and refigured by the narratives it appropriates. So in what way can this ever-changing self become accountable for its actions?

It is the call of the other that translates narrative identity into ethical identity.<sup>266</sup> "[T]o the question 'Where are you?' asked by another who needs me," the response is "'Here I am!' a response that is a statement of self-constancy." "Because someone is counting on me, I am *accountable for my actions before another.*"<sup>267</sup> This response of "Here I am!" to the call of the other "marks a halt in the wandering that may well result from the self's confrontation with a multitude of models for action and life, some of which go so far as to paralyze the capacity for firm action."<sup>268</sup> It converts the narrative's imaginative variations, which are already imbued with ethical elements, into a definite ethical stance. The act of commitment transforms the "I can try anything" of imagination into the "Here is where I stand!" of ethics.<sup>269</sup>

Nevertheless, there are fictional narratives (which Ricoeur calls limit-cases) which feature such a dissolution of identity that the question "Who am I?" becomes difficult to answer, except by the response "I am nothing." Here character—the set of acquired dispositions by which a person is identified—is no longer recognizable. In such cases, is it possible to bridge the gap between a narrative identity, with a self that is "fading away," and an ethical identity, with its moral commitments?<sup>270</sup> Ricoeur's answer is a resounding "Yes." It is possible to incorporate the doubt of "Who am I?" into the assured declaration of "Here is where I stand!" by rephrasing the question into "Who am I, so inconstant,

<sup>265</sup> "Intellectual Autobiography," 49.

<sup>266</sup> Sweeney, "Ethics and Narrative," 201.

<sup>267</sup> *OA*, 165.

<sup>268</sup> *OA*, 167.

<sup>269</sup> *OA*, 167–68.

<sup>270</sup> *OA*, 166–67.

that *notwithstanding* you count on me?" Thus, the identity of the self is answered as it is "made responsible by the expectation of the other."<sup>271</sup> This identity, rooted in self-constancy or commitment to the other, is a modest one. Selfhood has often been characterized only in terms of a person's ownership of his or her thoughts, actions, and passions. However, the introduction of the other as a factor in the constitution of the self means that selfhood goes beyond the idea of belongingness; rather, it is "a dialectic of ownership and of dispossession, of care and of carefreeness, of self-affirmation and self-effacement."<sup>272</sup>

### *The Self's Identity in Relation to the Other*

It is clear by now that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self is not centered on an autonomous self. First of all, narrative identity is applied not only to individual persons, but also to communities. "Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history."<sup>273</sup> Ricoeur gives the example of the Israelite community, whose narratives are both reflective and formative of the character of its community.<sup>274</sup>

Second, the self's capacity for designation already implies the other. To ascribe something to oneself means the ability to ascribe it to others as well. On one hand, "ascribing a state of consciousness to oneself is *felt*," while "ascribing it to someone else is *observed*," highlighting the otherness of the other; on the other hand, both oneself and the other have the capacity for self-designation, underlining their equivalence.<sup>275</sup> In a situation of interlocution, to say "I" is to address a "you." Thus, "every advance made in the direction of the selfhood of the speaker or the agent has as its counterpart a comparable advance in the otherness of the partner."<sup>276</sup>

The concern for the other is explicitly stated in Ricoeur's formulation of the ethical intention: it is "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions."<sup>277</sup> Ricoeur is aware that reflexivity can turn in upon itself, hence the need to be attentive to the other.

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<sup>271</sup> *OA*, 168.

<sup>272</sup> *OA*, 168.

<sup>273</sup> *TN* 3:247.

<sup>274</sup> *TN* 3:247–48.

<sup>275</sup> *OA*, 28.

<sup>276</sup> *OA*, 44.

<sup>277</sup> *OA*, 172.

Nonetheless, concern for the other, which Ricoeur terms “solicitude,” is already implied in self-esteem.<sup>278</sup> Self-esteem has more to do with one’s capacities than with one’s accomplishments: “I am that being who can evaluate his actions and, in assessing the goals of some of them to be good, is capable of evaluating himself and of judging himself to be good.”<sup>279</sup> Transforming this capacity into realization, however, requires the mediation of the other.<sup>280</sup> “It is first for the other that I am irreplaceable.”<sup>281</sup> Hence, the mutuality and reciprocity of friendship is needed,<sup>282</sup> in which each one esteems the other as oneself, and esteems oneself as the other.<sup>283</sup>

I cannot myself have self-esteem unless I esteem others *as* myself. “As myself” means that you too are capable of starting something in the world, of acting for a reason, of hierarchizing your priorities, of evaluating the ends of your actions, and, having done this, of holding yourself in esteem as I hold myself in esteem.<sup>284</sup>

However, there are other types of relationships whose starting point is not the reciprocity of friendship. At one end of the spectrum, in which friendship marks the midpoint, the other takes the initiative, as in moral injunction. At the other end, the self takes the initiative in giving to the suffering other. To restore the balance of giving and receiving, which is presupposed in a relationship of mutual self-esteem, the capacity for giving must be given to both.<sup>285</sup> In the first case, in which the self is summoned to responsibility, “equality is reestablished only through the recognition by the self of the superiority of the other’s authority.”<sup>286</sup> In the second case, in which the self extends sympathy to the other, “equality is reestablished only through the shared admission of fragility and, finally, of mortality.”<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *OA*, 180.

<sup>279</sup> *OA*, 181.

<sup>280</sup> *OA*, 181.

<sup>281</sup> *OA*, 193.

<sup>282</sup> To expound this theme, Ricoeur draws heavily from Aristotle. See *OA*, 181–88.

<sup>283</sup> *OA*, 194.

<sup>284</sup> *OA*, 193.

<sup>285</sup> *OA*, 188–91.

<sup>286</sup> *OA*, 192. The relationship of the self with God as the superior other is an example of this relationship.

<sup>287</sup> *OA*, 192. On this point, Ricoeur differentiates sympathy from pity, “in which the self is secretly pleased to know it has been spared” (191). True sympathy gives space to the suffering other to give in return. “For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely

The self's relationship to the other, however, is not limited to interpersonal relationships. "The other is also other than the 'you.'"<sup>288</sup> Thus, Ricoeur extends living well to the life of institutions. By an institution, he means "the structure of living together as this belongs to a historical community."<sup>289</sup> Ricoeur underscores the element of equality as the ethical component of the application of justice in institutions.<sup>290</sup> The *power-to-do*, which is ascribed to an agent of action, is translated into *power-in-common*, which is "the capacity of the members of a historical community to exercise in an indivisible manner their desire to live together."<sup>291</sup>

Nevertheless, there is another type of relationship of power between the self and the other. This is the "*power exerted over one will by another will*," which expresses the "dissymmetry between what one does, and what is done to another—in other words, what the other suffers."<sup>292</sup> Because of the potential for violence that this type of relationship may engender, there is a need for moral constraints; hence, the need for the deontological dimension of moral obligation. Here self-respect, which implies respect for the other, is needed to restrain the unbridled exercise of violence, which diminishes and destroys the *power-to-do* of others.<sup>293</sup>

### *God's Narrative Identity and the Response of the Self*

Ricoeur has shown how the narrative identity of the characters in a story, as it is expressed in the dialectic of sameness and selfhood in the interplay of concordance and discordance, can help shape our narrative identity, because it opens up different possibilities for action and life. Yet the characters in First Testament narratives are not limited to human characters. In fact, in many biblical narratives, the main char-

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from weakness itself. This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude, when unequal power finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity in exchange, which, in the hour of agony, finds refuge in the shared whisper of voices or the feeble embrace of clasped hands" (ibid.).

<sup>288</sup> *OA*, 194. Here Ricoeur emphasizes the distributive character of the self, which goes beyond the "I" in face of the "you," and is referred to obliquely in the conception of the self as "each one."

<sup>289</sup> *OA*, 194.

<sup>290</sup> *OA*, 194–202.

<sup>291</sup> *OA*, 220.

<sup>292</sup> *OA*, 220.

<sup>293</sup> *OA*, 222; "Human Being as Subject," 100.

acter is God. God is identified by the narrator by descriptions, personal names, and by personal pronouns. God is also depicted as a speaking subject, who declares, "I am . . .," in a situation of interlocution. Above all, God is presented as the main agent of action, who initiates change and exercises power over others. Like the human characters in the text, God also has a narrative identity, which follows the temporal operation of the plot in reconciling identity and diversity. It is a question then how God's narrative identity can shape the reader's narrative identity, and consequently, his or her ethical identity.

Ricoeur does not tackle this question at all, inasmuch as his preoccupation in *Time and Narrative* and in *Oneself as Another* is with narrative in general and not the biblical narrative in particular. Nonetheless, his two final Gifford lectures, which were published separately from *Oneself as Another*, set out his view on the self's relationship to the Scriptures.<sup>294</sup> Particularly, he poses the problem of "how the entirely original configuration of the biblical scriptures can refigure the self."<sup>295</sup> Here he uses the metaphor of the book and the mirror. How can "the book, made up of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, become a mirror for a self who responds to the solicitation of this book?"<sup>296</sup> One must note that Ricoeur here is not specifically dealing with biblical narratives, but with the entire biblical material spanning the two Testaments, with its various genres and forms of discourse.

The central issue of faith, according to Ricoeur is "naming God." Faith, however, is instructed by the biblical writings, which mediate the meaning of religious experiences to communities whose identities are founded upon them. "If I can name God, however imperfectly, it is because the texts that have been proclaimed to me have already done so."<sup>297</sup> It is within the framework of these writings and the communities that interpret and receive them that the response of the self can clearly come into focus.

Ricoeur discusses an initial approach to the configuration of the biblical text and its implications for the refiguration of the self, based

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<sup>294</sup> See "The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures," in Aune and McCarthy, *Whole and Divided Self*, 201–220; "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation," in *FS*, 262–75. Ricoeur did not include them in his book because he wanted to keep his philosophical discourse separate from his theological works (on this, see *OA*, 23–25).

<sup>295</sup> "Self in Mirror," 205.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>297</sup> "Self in Mirror," 207.

on *The Great Code* by Northrop Frye.<sup>298</sup> This approach stresses the metaphorical language of Scripture and its imaginative unity.<sup>299</sup> The poetic language releases a typological process that connects events and figures in a “cumulative and mutually reinforcing way.” Because this purely literary approach excludes any reference to history or cosmology, it is free to aim at nothing except the listeners, who then may see themselves, as in a mirror, in light of the imaginative unity of the text.<sup>300</sup>

Ricoeur, however, favors a second approach, which utilizes the variety of genres in Scripture and stresses its lack of a single theological center. In this approach, the polyphonic unity of the biblical canon, rather than its imaginative unity, is emphasized. Each genre has a different way of naming God, and hence, also calls for a different response from the self.<sup>301</sup> “God . . . is named differently in the narration that recounts, the prophecy that speaks in his name, in the prescription that designates him as the source of the imperative, in the wisdom that seeks him as the meaning of meaning, and in the hymn that calls out to him in the second person.”<sup>302</sup> This polyphony in naming God in the various genres implies a corresponding polyphony in the figure of the self that draws its identity from Scripture.

Drawing from the work of Claus Westermann,<sup>303</sup> Ricoeur shows how God’s words and acts in Scripture correspond to a variety of human responses. Thus, to the figure of God who saves in the exodus corresponds the confession of praise; the God who blesses is complemented by the response of gratefulness; the God who judges in the deuteronomistic history calls forth attitudes of repentance; the prescriptive genre summons one to obedience, while prophetic condemnation and promise engender the responses of penitence and hope.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

<sup>299</sup> By imaginative, Ricoeur does not mean imaginary, but poetic, typological, and kerygmatic.

<sup>300</sup> “Self in Mirror,” 207–10.

<sup>301</sup> “Self in Mirror,” 210–11. See also “Naming God,” in *FS*, 217–35, which also explores how the different genres speak about God. Ricoeur emphasizes that these genres are not just rhetorical devices, but encompasses “a particular style of confession of faith where God is named in an original fashion” (“Naming God,” 224).

<sup>302</sup> “Self in Mirror,” 213.

<sup>303</sup> Claus Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979).

<sup>304</sup> “Self in Mirror,” 214–16.



Nevertheless, none of the literary genres, taken separately or together, can fully capture the meaning of the Name. The referent "God" is also a limit-expression, for "God is designated at the same time as the one who communicates and the one who withdraws."<sup>305</sup> This is seen in the incident of the Burning Bush (Exod 3:13–15) and in the parables and sayings of the kingdom of God, in which we encounter a God whose name and kingdom rule cannot be captured in any human language. This withdrawal of God's name corresponds as well to a certain stance of the self: "the disappearance of the ego, the letting go of self."<sup>306</sup>

In the second of the Gifford lectures,<sup>307</sup> Ricoeur further develops the view of the self as "constituted and defined by its position as respondent to the propositions of meaning issuing from the symbolic network."<sup>308</sup> This self eschews the hubris of an absolute self, since it is a self in relation, as a respondent to the one who calls.<sup>309</sup> Thus, the first paradigm of a responding self is that of the "summoned" or "mandated self," which is drawn from the prophetic call narratives. New paradigms of the self, which express the dialogical relation, are developed from the initial image of the mandated self. These include the following: conformity to the image of Christ, which relates to being created in God's image and reflecting the glory of God; the paradigm of the inner teacher, following the theme of wisdom and of Christ who "dwells in your hearts" (Eph 3:16–17),<sup>310</sup> and the urgings of the conscience, "the most internalized expression of the responding self."<sup>311</sup>

Ricoeur's exposition on naming God and the corresponding response of the self provide some clues to the question raised above concerning how the self's identity can be shaped by God's narrative identity in the text. The self responds to how God is named in the narrative, and it is in this way that its narrative identity is formed. Ricoeur, however, does not take into account the interplay of concordance and discordance in God's character in the narrative. This kind of temporal narrative identity is exhibited in Jack Miles's *God: A Biography*.<sup>312</sup> Miles presents

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<sup>305</sup> "Self in Mirror," 216.

<sup>306</sup> "Self in Mirror," 219.

<sup>307</sup> See n. 294.

<sup>308</sup> "Summoned Subject," 262.

<sup>309</sup> "Summoned Subject," 262.

<sup>310</sup> "Summoned Subject," 263–70.

<sup>311</sup> "Summoned Subject," 271.

<sup>312</sup> Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

a multifaceted, disturbing, yet fascinating picture of the deity. Following a strictly sequential reading of the Hebrew Bible (the order of the Tanakh), Miles writes a biography of God that considers the deity as a literary character, a protagonist who undergoes development in the unfolding of the plot. What emerges is a God who has multiple, even conflicting personalities, who changes, discovers himself, and goes through a learning process in the course of relating with humanity and with Israel. Miles's interests, however, do not lie in exploring the kind of response from the self that is called for by such a rendering of God.

Ricoeur describes God as "the metahero of a metahistory," the "superagent" or "supercharacter" in the founding events encompassing creation, the patriarchal sojourning, the wilderness wandering, deliverance, conquest and settlement of the land, and the monarchy.<sup>313</sup> However, embedded in these grand narratives are short episodes and stories in which God seems to act in discordant and even incomprehensible ways, when put alongside the dominant characterization found in the grand narratives. Such a naming of God would necessitate a corresponding response from the self. Ricoeur, however, does not pay sufficient attention to this discordance in the constitution of God's character, and the interplay of sameness and selfhood in God's identity in the narrative, as well as the response of the self that it calls for.

Nevertheless, Ricoeur does speak of limit-expressions, which act as a complement and corrective to models or images for naming God. In the biblical writings, there are models of God such as king, judge, father, husband, lover, etc., which should not be considered models of the divine figure but models of "God's accompanying God's people, human beings, and all of humanity."<sup>314</sup> In this way, they help nourish the ethical and political life. However, because of their anthropomorphic character, they are liable to become idols. The function of limit-expressions is to subvert these models so that they do not become idols. Limit-expressions such as parables, paradox, the eschatological sayings and the Unnameable Name, suspend ordinary reality in order to bring to light life's limit-experiences. These limit-experiences are not limited to catastrophes such as failure, death, and fault, but may also include the experiences of joy and creativity.<sup>315</sup> What they have in common is

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<sup>313</sup> "Self in Mirror," 211.

<sup>314</sup> "Naming God," 233.

<sup>315</sup> "Naming God," 233–34. For a fuller discussion of limit-expressions and limit-experiences, see BH, 108–145.

that they surpass “the ethical and the political at the expense of the positive, although always precarious and provisory, role of the ‘analogical models.’”<sup>316</sup>

It is among these limit-expressions that I see the place for narratives that highlight the discordance and incomprehensibility of God’s actions. They complement and correct the concordant and positive models of God. In doing so, they call the self, who knows itself as an agent who has the *power-to-do*, to recognize its own boundaries, powerlessness, and fragility. The dominant concordant images of God often buttress the self’s certainties and makes it think that it can know everything, do everything, and accomplish anything to which it sets its mind. God’s discordant identity, however, conceived in terms of selfhood, cuts down the self’s pretensions and challenges it to acknowledge its finiteness and limitations.

The theme of God’s narrative identity remains underdeveloped in my discussion of Exod 4:18–26. However, it is productive for exploring the ethical problematic of God’s character in this passage. I will discuss this further in the conclusion.

#### NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AND MEMORY

Narrative and identity are linked to the problems of memory and forgetting, as Ricoeur asserts in his most recent book, *Memory, History, and Forgetting*.<sup>317</sup> Narrative and identity, however, are not the main themes of the book, since its main interest is to explore the problem of the representation of the past by investigating three interlocking subjects: the phenomenology of memory, the epistemology of history, and the hermeneutics of the historical condition, which exposes the representation of the past to the dangers and protection of forgetting.<sup>318</sup> However, Ricoeur believes that the configurative dimensions of narrative and the fragility of identity can lead to certain abuses of memory and forgetting; this brings memory into the realm of ethics. In the following, I set out some of the main lines of Ricoeur’s work, especially in relation to the links between memory, narrative, identity, and ethics.

<sup>316</sup> “Naming God,” 234.

<sup>317</sup> *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), henceforth cited as *MHF*.

<sup>318</sup> *MHF*, xv–xvi.

*Memory as Object and Capacity*

There are two sides to memory, according to Ricoeur, which are expressed by the Greeks in two terms: *mnēmē*, that is remembering, the passive side of memory, and *anamnēsis*, that is recollecting, the active side. The first has to do with the presence of an absent thing, in terms of the spontaneous, involuntary evocation or an appearing of an image in the mind. The second falls under the rubric of memory as an exercise because it involves the effort to search for memories. Thus, “to remember is to have a memory or to set off in search of a memory.”<sup>319</sup> Both, however, have one thing in common—the passage of time.<sup>320</sup> The final referent of memory is the past, what was formerly perceived, acquired, and learned. It is this element of temporal distance—the distinction between before and after, earlier and later, that differentiates memory from imagination.<sup>321</sup> Memory is “the guardian of the depth of time and of temporal distance.”<sup>322</sup> With these two sides, memory can be understood as an object or as a capacity, as the intended (in the plural, memories), or as the intention (memory in the singular).

As an object, memory has been associated with image. We speak of memory “as an image we have of the past.”<sup>323</sup> In Western philosophy, memory as image is expressed in the idea of *eikōn*, of representation. This identification has exposed memory to the constant confusion between memory and imagination, although imagination has to do with the vision of something unreal, while memory deals with the positing of a prior reality.<sup>324</sup> However, the challenge of the association of memory with images is such that one is never completely sure whether what one remembers is accurate and faithful to the past. This problem becomes more acute in the notion of history as representation of the past. This will be discussed more fully below.<sup>325</sup>

As a capacity, the act of exercising memory is one of the capacities of the self, along with being able to speak, to act, to designate oneself as the author of one’s actions and to be accountable for them, and to

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<sup>319</sup> *MHF*, 4.

<sup>320</sup> *MHF*, 18.

<sup>321</sup> *MHF*, 15, 18.

<sup>322</sup> *MHF*, 57.

<sup>323</sup> *MHF*, 44.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>325</sup> See pp. 63–64.

recount one's own story.<sup>326</sup> These capacities pertain to the *power-to-do* of the self—the “I can”—which is constitutive of personal identity.<sup>327</sup> The exercise of memory, however, opens it to different types of uses and also abuses: too much/too little memory, blocked memory, and manipulated or forced memory, abuses that are also related to the phenomenon of forgetting.

Memory can be either personal or collective. On one hand, memory seems to have a fundamental private character. There is a “mineness” to memory which links a person's past to his or her present and pushes one to the future. This assures the temporal continuity and identity of a person.<sup>328</sup> On the other hand, one needs the support of others in order to remember so that “one does not remember alone.”<sup>329</sup> The social bond is not only implicated in our memories as object; they are also necessary in the exercise of adequate recollection and recognition.<sup>330</sup>

### *Memory and Narrative*

From images, memory passes on to narrative through what Ricoeur calls “declarative memory.” Declarative memory is the verbalization of the memory-image, and is differentiated from habit-memory or procedural memory.<sup>331</sup> In declarative memory, memory is elevated to the level of language and becomes visible and public.<sup>332</sup> The original perception of the experience retained in the memory is restored by pronouncing it.<sup>333</sup> This involves a reflective phase of remembering, when the

<sup>326</sup> *MHF*, 26, 343–44, 392.

<sup>327</sup> See pp. 50–51 above.

<sup>328</sup> *MHF*, 96.

<sup>329</sup> *MHF*, 121.

<sup>330</sup> *MHF*, 120–22. Ricoeur reconciles the two positions—the personal and the collective—by exploring the concept of attribution: self-attribution as well as attribution to others, strangers, and neighbors. In ascribing psychical attributes, such as memory, to oneself, one also implies ascription to others than oneself. Thus, “ascription to others is found to be not superimposed upon self-ascription but co-extensive with it” (*MHF*, 127). There is, according to Ricoeur, “a distinct, yet reciprocal and interconnected, constitution of individual memory and collective memory” (*MHF*, 95). However, between these two poles is the middle ground of close relations, the privileged other, with whom one can share memories because they testify to the major events of the self (*MHF*, 131–32).

<sup>331</sup> Procedural memory involves activities of movement and motor aptitudes (such as driving a car) (*MHF*, 424), while habit-memory deals with an experience acquired earlier but is repeated in the present, so that it does not have the character of being totally in the past (*MHF*, 24–26).

<sup>332</sup> *MHF*, 129.

<sup>333</sup> *MHF*, 162.

memory receives a dating in the sense of temporal markers that help place the memory in relation to the succession of remembered events in the past. One asks, “When? How long?”<sup>334</sup> Hence, a dynamic of recollection is released.

Declarative memory is set on the path of narrativity through these temporal markers. As mentioned earlier, it is time that distinguishes narrative from other art forms and propels its forward movement.<sup>335</sup> The journey of recollecting the past involves a movement through time that demands a recounting of the succession of events. Thus, an incipient narrative is born. Memories, whether evoked or recollected, are divided at first and separated from each other by gaps of time and forgetfulness, but the introduction of a narrative enables these memories to be connected. “It is primarily in narrative that memories in the plural and memory in the singular are articulated, and differentiation joined to continuity.”<sup>336</sup>

### *Memory and Identity*

There are several features of memory that link it to personal identity. First, as has been mentioned earlier, there is a peculiar “mineness” to memory—“my memories are not yours”—so that it becomes a defining feature of the self.<sup>337</sup> Memory is one of the capacities of the self and one of the means by which the self exercises its agency. Second, consciousness, as Locke sees it, is inherent in personal identity, and memory is the consciousness of the same self in the past.<sup>338</sup> “It is in memory that the original tie of consciousness to the past appears to reside.”<sup>339</sup> Third, this consciousness of the past assures the temporal continuity of the self, which is a constituent part of personal identity. Thus, through memory, one can traverse back and see the events of one’s childhood as separate and yet continuous to one’s present.<sup>340</sup> From the past, one can also look to the future and then back again through an “inverse movement of transit from expectation toward memory, across the living present.”<sup>341</sup>

<sup>334</sup> *MHF*, 42.

<sup>335</sup> See pp. 43–44.

<sup>336</sup> *MHF*, 96–97.

<sup>337</sup> *MHF*, 96.

<sup>338</sup> *MHF*, 105.

<sup>339</sup> *MHF*, 96.

<sup>340</sup> *MHF*, 96–97.

<sup>341</sup> *MHF*, 97.

Memory then is identity's recourse to justify its sameness over time.<sup>342</sup> Hence, just as narrative and identity are linked by the temporal element, memory and identity are also linked by their temporal features. Time then is the common element that binds memory, identity, and narrative together. Moreover, it is "through the narrative function that memory is incorporated into the formation of identity."<sup>343</sup>

The problem set forth above concerning memory as the "representation of the image" and concerning history as the "representation of the past" becomes acute when memory and narrative are brought to bear upon the formation of identity. The proximity between memory and imagination and between history and fiction means that the resources of memory and narrative can be abused. Moreover, identity itself is fragile for several reasons. As was discussed in the previous section, identity over time can mean both sameness (*idem*) and selfhood (*ipse*). However, there is a tendency for identity to retreat "from the flexibility, proper to self-constancy as manifested in the promise, to the inflexible rigidity of a *character*."<sup>344</sup> Identity is also fragile because of the constant threat of the other who is perceived to be different. Moreover, the founding events that have formed the identity of community are often based on violence that has a devastating effect on others.<sup>345</sup>

Because of the selective function of narrative and its capacity for imaginative variations, it can easily become an instrument for manipulation through the ideologization of memory. Here, memory is mobilized, by way of narrative, in order to support an ideology that defines the collective identity. As noted earlier, the narrative identities of the characters in the story are constructed through the action of concordance and discordance in the plot. In turn, the narrative identity of the characters provides models for personal identity that, when acted upon, molds ethical identity.<sup>346</sup> Ideology, however, can impose an "authorized" history through a frenzy of public commemorations and celebrations that involve "a strategy of remembering" as well as a "strategy of forgetting."<sup>347</sup> Thus, elements of the collective history are selectively remembered or forgotten in order to support a collective

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<sup>342</sup> *MHF*, 81.

<sup>343</sup> *MHF*, 84–85.

<sup>344</sup> *MHF*, 81.

<sup>345</sup> *MHF*, 81–82.

<sup>346</sup> See pp. 49–52.

<sup>347</sup> *MHF*, 85, 448.

identity that would maintain and perpetuate the socio-political base of the ones in power.

Here, Ricoeur shows the negative side of the formative role of narrative in personal and ethical identity. In previous books, Ricoeur speaks of narrative in mostly positive ways. However, in this book, written just before his death, Ricoeur speaks out against a narrative placed in the service of memory that has been manipulated and ideologized.

The resource of narrative then becomes a trap, when higher powers take over this emplotment and impose a canonical narrative by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery. A devious form of forgetting is at work here, resulting from stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves.<sup>348</sup>

However, it is not only the ones who hold power who are responsible for the abuse of remembering and forgetting. The social actors themselves are involved in complicity in the act by a semi-passive, semi-active strategy of avoidance, in which through denial and evasion and by wanting not to know, they accept the identity defined and imposed by the prevailing power through a narrative of an ideologized memory.<sup>349</sup>

### *The Ethics of Memory*

The discussion on the use and abuse of memory brings with it the idea of the duty of memory as an imperative with its twofold aspect: “as imposing itself on desire from outside and as exerting a constraint experienced subjectively as obligation.”<sup>350</sup> This brings memory into the ethical realm. Ricoeur asserts that the duty of memory is the duty of justice. More explicitly, he states, “the duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self.”<sup>351</sup>

In order to understand Ricoeur’s argument on the duty of memory, one must recount the other abuses of natural memory that he identifies. Drawing from Freud, Ricoeur tackles the abuse of memory on the pathological-therapeutic level, that of blocked memory. Because of the pain accompanying the remembrance of traumatic memories, the patient becomes involved in transference, that is, in unconsciously and compulsively “acting out” the memory instead of properly doing

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<sup>348</sup> *MHF*, 448.

<sup>349</sup> *MHF*, 448–49.

<sup>350</sup> *MHF*, 88.

<sup>351</sup> *MHF*, 89.



the work of remembrance and mourning. Thus, instead of remembrance, there is suppression and denial; instead of mourning, there is melancholia, which is more preoccupied with itself than with the lost object.<sup>352</sup> Ricoeur thinks that it is not only individuals that are struck by the malady of transference or repetition-memory. Even collective entities “substitute acting out for the true recollection by which the present would be reconciled with the past,”<sup>353</sup> and this leads to malevolent effects.<sup>354</sup> He believes that much violence in the world springs from too much memory (in terms of repetition-memory) or too little memory (in terms of denial and suppression). Instead of confronting the painful wounds of the past and undertaking the work of mourning through reality-testing, nations and peoples compulsively “act out” the past in their violence toward others.<sup>355</sup>

However, the duty of memory goes beyond applying oneself to the work of remembering and the work of mourning, which are applied only to the past. To extract the exemplary value from memory, one must turn it into a project, whose concern is not just the past but also the future. Otherwise, remembering degenerates into a “cult of memory,” obliterating the future and the aim of memory.<sup>356</sup> What turns memory into a project, however, is the work of justice because it gives memory “the form of the future and of the imperative.”<sup>357</sup> Ricoeur connects the idea of justice with that of debt: “we are indebted to those who have gone before us for part of what we are.”<sup>358</sup> Paying this debt involves not only preserving the heritage of those who have gone before, but also maintaining the feeling of being obligated to them, especially to the victims. However, it must be kept in mind that “the victim at issue here is the other victim, other than ourselves,” lest we demand endless reparation.<sup>359</sup>

The duty of memory can also be abused, when the impassioned plea to fulfill this duty actually covers an obsession that partakes of the character of pathological repetition-memory. Thus, in the guise

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<sup>352</sup> *MHF*, 70–73.

<sup>353</sup> *MHF*, 79.

<sup>354</sup> *MHF*, 444.

<sup>355</sup> *MHF*, 79–80.

<sup>356</sup> *MHF*, 86.

<sup>357</sup> *MHF*, 88.

<sup>358</sup> *MHF*, 89.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

of “speaking for the victims’ demand for justice,”<sup>360</sup> one can embark on excessive memorial commemorations that have for their goal the manipulation of conscience.<sup>361</sup>

Thus, despite Ricoeur’s delineation of the abuses of memory into three categories—blocked memory, manipulated memory, and obligated memory—the abuses are actually interrelated, especially when it relates to collective memory. When communities are not able to process traumatic memories by the work of mourning and remembrance, transference can occur, one sign of which is the obsessive “acting out” of the past in celebrations and commemorations. This can lead to the manipulation of the conscience of the members of the community through appeals and injunctions “to remember” *our own* glories and humiliations, to the point of disregarding the duty of memory which is “to do justice, through memories, to *an other than the self*.”<sup>362</sup>

### *Forgetting and Forgiveness*

The phenomenon of forgetting is often seen negatively because it challenges the reliability of memory, so that memory is seen as “a struggle against forgetting.”<sup>363</sup> From the perspective of neuroscience, forgetting occurs because of deterioration in the brain; hence, forgetting is a clinical dysfunction, an effacement of neural traces that leads to distortion of memory.<sup>364</sup> There is, however, a second paradigm of forgetting, one that gives it a positive value. From the perspective of phenomenology, psychical traces of the original impression continue to persist, as can be seen in the experience of recognition. Thus, Ricoeur speaks of a “reserve of forgetting,” in the sense that there is an “‘unconscious’ existence of memories,” which remains latent, until it returns in the pleasure of recognition.<sup>365</sup> In this case, forgetting does not mean the loss of memories, but its dormancy and inaccessibility, and its “removal from the vigilance of consciousness.”<sup>366</sup> Forgetting then is understood as “an immemorial resource and not an inexorable destruction,”<sup>367</sup>

<sup>360</sup> *MHF*, 90.

<sup>361</sup> *MHF*, 89–90.

<sup>362</sup> *MHF*, 89. *Itals mine*.

<sup>363</sup> *MHF*, 413.

<sup>364</sup> *MHF*, 426.

<sup>365</sup> *MHF*, 417.

<sup>366</sup> *MHF*, 440.

<sup>367</sup> *MHF*, 442–43.

giving it a positive meaning, since without forgetting, there could be no remembering. These two paradigms of forgetting—in terms of erosion and preservation—remain in tension and are not resolved.<sup>368</sup>

Under the rubric of forgetting, Ricoeur cites again the abuses of memory as also the abuses of forgetting. Thus, blocked memory is forgetful memory in the phenomenological sense, in which the trauma remains, but remains unavailable until brought to the surface through the work of remembering and mourning.<sup>369</sup> Manipulated memory is selective forgetting by institutions that impose an official, sanitized version of history to prop up the status quo,<sup>370</sup> and by social actors who accept the sanitized version and thus, are involved in passive forgetting. Lastly, obligated memory finds its abuse in amnesty, in which institutions command the extinguishment of the memory of past crimes and offenses for the sake of unity, to the point of saying that “nothing has occurred.” This denial of memory is akin to amnesia and Ricoeur believes that, despite its seemingly noble intentions, the practice of amnesty is defective.<sup>371</sup>

The alternative, according to Ricoeur, is not amnesty, but forgiveness. This requires “the work of memory, which work is completed by the work of mourning and guided by the spirit of forgiveness.”<sup>372</sup> This form of forgetting is not a “duty to silence evil, but to state it in a pacifist mode, without anger.”<sup>373</sup>

In chap. 4, I will show how God’s call awakened Moses’ memory regarding his Israelite lineage and heritage, thus underscoring Moses’ debt to previous generations and his duty toward his contemporaries in Egypt. However, a death encounter with Yahweh was necessary in order to unblock Moses’ memory completely and enable him to embrace his vocation fully. In chap. 5, I will partly attribute the loss of Filipino identity to the Filipino colonial experience with Spain and the United States, which is further aggravated by the production of historical narratives that manipulate memory to glorify the contributions of the colonial powers at the expense of the local community’s indigenous resources.

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<sup>368</sup> *MHF*, 443.

<sup>369</sup> *MHF*, 444–48.

<sup>370</sup> *MHF*, 448–49.

<sup>371</sup> *MHF*, 452–55.

<sup>372</sup> *MHF*, 456.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

## HISTORY AND FICTION IN FIRST TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

There is one other issue that needs to be tackled because it has implications for the configurative and refigurative operations of a biblical narrative. This is the question of where First Testament narratives fall between the two great narrative modes, whether it is history or fiction. In this section, I discuss Ricoeur's views on the correlation, distinctions, and interweaving of history and fiction. I then explore the nature of First Testament narratives using this framework.

*The Two Narrative Modes: History and Fiction*

At first glance, there seems to be a great divide between history and fiction, by virtue of each of their truth claims. Ricoeur shows, however, that the divide is not as great as it may seem, and that there is a correlation, even a "mutual belonging" between the two.<sup>374</sup> First, both history and fiction draw from the prefigurations of the practical field (*mimesis*<sub>1</sub>). Second, both share a common structure in the level of *sense*, where sense is seen as operating in the configurative act (*mimesis*<sub>2</sub>). Lastly, they share an interweaving *reference* in the way they describe and redescribe the historical condition of human beings. Here, *reference* is seen as operating in the refigurative act (*mimesis*<sub>3</sub>).<sup>375</sup> For these reasons, history and fiction belong together to narrative discourse.

*Configuration in History and Fiction*

At the level of configuration (*mimesis*<sub>2</sub>), both history and fiction share a structural unity in that they utilize the structure of emplotment, understood in the broad sense as "discordant concordance" and the "temporal synthesis of the heterogeneous." Thus, they exhibit the fea-

<sup>374</sup> "The Narrative Function," in *HHS*, 274.

<sup>375</sup> Ricoeur uses the language of sense and reference to describe the relationship of history and fiction. Drawing from Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, Ricoeur describes sense as "what" is said in discourse, reference as "about what" is said in discourse. Sense is immanent or inner to the discourse, while reference points to something beyond the language itself, to what is transcendent or outer to the discourse, to a world. See *RM*, 73–75; *IT*, 19–22; 10–11; 66; and "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *HHS*, 140. Ricoeur sees both sense and reference as components of the "objective" side of discourse, which he equates with the propositional content. The "subjective" side consists of the self-reference of the sentence (its reference to the subject, the particular speaker who uttered the sentence), the illocutionary dimension of the speech act (what is done by the act of uttering the sentence), and the intention of recognition by the hearer (*IT*, 19, 12–18).

tures of a plot, which consist of the dynamic character of the configurative operation, the primacy of order over succession, the competition between concordance and discordance, the narration's schematization of generalities in the form of laws, and the conflict of sedimentation and innovation in the formation of traditions.<sup>376</sup>

Ricoeur argues that history ultimately has a narrative character because it utilizes operations that exercise our narrative understanding, or our basic competence for following a story. Without this narrative competence, history would cease to be intelligible.<sup>377</sup> In the same way, he asserts the precedence of narrative understanding in fiction by virtue of its irreducibly temporal character. This is in contrast to the rationalizing and dechronologizing approach of narrative semiotics, or what is more commonly called structuralism.<sup>378</sup> History and fiction, in varying degrees, show the interplay of temporal configuration and succession.<sup>379</sup>

<sup>376</sup> Ricoeur enumerates these features in *TN* 1:229; cf. *TN* 2:156–58.

<sup>377</sup> *TN* 1:91. He arrives at this conclusion, however, not by adopting a completely historical narrativist standpoint (which sees a direct connection between history and narrative) or by completely disregarding the anti-narrativist arguments (which deny any connection at all between the two). He sees the strengths of both. Anti-narrativists criticize the notion of event as absolutely past, absolutely brought about by human agents, and absolutely unique (*TN* 1:96–111), and stress the importance of explanation (*TN* 1:111–13). The historical narrativists demonstrate that narrative understanding undergirds any historical work (*TN* 1:143–61). However, Ricoeur sees problems with these two positions, if taken without the insights of the other. So instead of a direct relationship, Ricoeur advocates an indirect connection between history and narrative competence (*TN* 1:175). He says, there is “an indirect connection of derivation, by which historical knowledge proceeds from our narrative understanding without losing anything of its scientific ambition” (*TN* 1:92).

<sup>378</sup> *TN* 2:4, 29. Ricoeur asserts that the deep structures of semiotics are ultimately dependent on the temporal structure of the narrative (*TN* 2:33). In his estimation, structuralism did not succeed in doing away with diachrony, since there are “certain irreducibly temporal factors” in the narrative that resists dechronologization (*TN* 2:46). This is evident in many works using structural analysis, where temporal features keep popping up, so that one finally has to conclude that “the diachronic reading of the narrative cannot be absorbed into the achronic reading” (“The Narrative Function,” 285). Thus, there is a prior intelligibility that precedes the rational construction of rules in narratology.

<sup>379</sup> This interplay of configuration and succession is what has confused historians and structuralists, according to Ricoeur. He remarks, “whereas the tendency of many historians or epistemologists of history was to overestimate the chronological and sequential character of the narrative and to draw from that an argument against the narrative character of history, the tendency of structuralist literary criticism is, on the contrary, to assign the chronological aspect of the narrative to the mere surface structure and to recognise nothing but ‘achronic’ features in the deep structure” (“Narrative Function,” 282). The key is to recognize that both configuration and succession operate in the narrative.

Nevertheless, even though both history and fiction are rooted in narrative understanding, Ricoeur does not collapse the two together because history's link to narrative understanding differs from that of fiction.

History as a critical inquiry preserves an epistemological break with narrative understanding so that the link between historical knowledge and narrative understanding is only indirect.<sup>380</sup> Ricoeur argues that it is possible to derive the epistemological break between historical inquiry and narrative understanding from the break established by the configuring operation of *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>. As was mentioned above, narrative configuration is characterized by the paradox of a *split* as well as a *connection* between the plot and the field of action. Through a method of questioning back,<sup>381</sup> one can nevertheless reconstruct how history intends and refers back to the order of action on the level of *mimesis*<sub>1</sub>, and thus maintains its links with the field of praxis.<sup>382</sup> Through this process, one can see that history as a scientific inquiry still retains the features of the narrative plot,<sup>383</sup> and thus requires the exercise of

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<sup>380</sup> This epistemological break works on three levels: (1) history makes use of explanations as part of its procedure; (2) it deals with anonymous entities and not just with identifiable human agents which are present in narratives; and (3) historical time seems to bear no relation to the time of action, since it can characterize a multiplicity of times—from the short time-span of an event to the long and very long time-span of civilizations and symbol systems. See *TN*, 175–77. Because of this break, Ricoeur disagrees with W. Gallie's notion that history can "simply be considered as a species of the genus story" (*TN* 1:177, 179; cf. Gallie, *Historical Understanding*, 66).

<sup>381</sup> Ricoeur based this method on the one practiced by Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

<sup>382</sup> *TN* 1:180–81. Ricoeur discusses the "relay stations" in the triple levels of historical procedures, societal entities, and temporality that can be used to guide historical knowledge back to the narrative configuration of *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, and in turn to the narrative prefigurations of *mimesis*<sub>1</sub>.

<sup>383</sup> In terms of historical procedures, causal imputation is related both to emplotment through the exploration of probable causes using the imagination, and to scientific explanation through the analysis of factors, the recourse to rules based on experience, and to the assignment of degrees of probability. Thus, history shares a continuity and discontinuity both with emplotment and with explanation by laws. It is in this sense that one can speak of causal imputation as a *quasi-plot* (*TN* 1:182–92). Societal entities, although they cannot simply be reduced to individual actions and actors, refer back to individuals construed as characters in a narrative (*TN* 1:193). The notion of society, as the object of history and taken as a singular community entity, contains oblique references to the individuals who compose it. This "participatory belonging" of individuals to society allows it to partake of the qualities of a *quasi-character* (*TN* 1:194–200). Lastly, Ricoeur argues that "the time constructed by the historian stems, through a succession of ever-widening gaps, from the temporality proper to the narrative" (*TN* 1:207). Here he uses the notion of event as "singular and typical, contingent and expected, deviant and dependent on paradigms," and contends that historical events resemble events in

our narrative competence to be intelligible. Yet this indirect derivation respects “the epistemological break without shattering the intentional aim of historical knowledge.”<sup>384</sup>

In fiction, narrative understanding stems from the schematization of the productive imagination, which has all the features of a tradition.<sup>385</sup> It proceeds from the perennality of narrative paradigms, a perennality which is based on the “history of forms, genres, and types,” and not on atemporal rules.<sup>386</sup> These narrative paradigms exhibit the characteristic of the plot, defined not in a narrow sense of a simple story line or a schema, in which one can easily identify the connection between the initial complication and denouement,<sup>387</sup> but rather plot “as an integrating dynamism that transforms” a variety of incidents “into a unified and complete story.”<sup>388</sup> It is this *principle of discordant concordance* that remains stable amidst all the mutations of the narrative genre in fiction.<sup>389</sup>

### *Refiguration in History and Fiction*

The distinctions between history and fiction are more marked at the refiguration stage (*mimesis*<sub>3</sub>). At this level, history and fiction differ in their refiguration of time and the “real,” and in their respective referential claims. This does not mean that there is no commonality at all between history and fiction at the refiguration stage. In fact, Ricoeur sees three connections between history and fiction. First, history and fiction, in their respective ways, respond to the difficulties produced by

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the narrative plot (*TN* 1:208). Thus, the multiplicity of times, including the long time-spans, which characterize the works of French historians, can be regarded as contingent, deviant, and singular events which can be integrated into an over-all plot. They can thus be regarded as *quasi-events*. The plurality of historical times then is just a feature of the episodic and configurative dimensions of narrative time (*TN* 1:225).

<sup>384</sup> *TN* 1:193.

<sup>385</sup> “Life in Quest,” 24; *TN* 2:14.

<sup>386</sup> *TN* 2:29. Ricoeur contrasts the transhistorical systematization in Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) with the ahistorical systematization of narrative semiotics. Frye’s search for order is not marked by “its coherence or deductive virtues,” but is a result of an open, inductive approach that seeks to encompass as many works as possible in the Western tradition. Thus, it “stems from narrative understanding in its traditionality” (*TN* 2:15).

<sup>387</sup> *TN* 2:9.

<sup>388</sup> *TN* 2:8.

<sup>389</sup> *TN* 2:4. Thus, even with the modern novel with its emphasis on character rather than plot, a synthesizing operation still takes place that involves the configuration of actions. Action, however, is not construed as limited to outward behavior, but includes the internal changes which the characters undergo—their moral transformations, growth, education, emotional fluctuations, and sensations (*TN* 2:10).

the phenomenology of time. Second, there is a parallel between the relationship of history to the past and the relationship of the reader to a fictive text. Third, history and fiction interweave in that they borrow from the intentionality of the other to realize their respective intentionalities.

*Refiguration of Time.* To understand how history and fiction refigure time, it is necessary first to discuss Ricoeur's premise regarding the aporias of time. According to Ricoeur, time can either be viewed from the perspective of the subject (phenomenological or lived time) or from that of the object (cosmic or world time).<sup>390</sup> Philosophical speculation on time shows an unbridgeable gap between the discordant concordance of phenomenological time and the simple succession of cosmological time, so that one is irreducible into the other. Ricoeur shows that in analyzing time, the two exclude each other, but ironically, also indirectly presuppose each other. Thus, while both perspectives are incompatible, both are also necessary.<sup>391</sup> In order to demonstrate this, Ricoeur confronts Augustine with Aristotle, Husserl with Kant, and Heidegger with the ordinary conception of time.<sup>392</sup> Ricoeur's conclusion after this long trajectory is that these philosophers' attempts to solve the gap between cosmic time and lived time have failed. A completely different approach is called for, one which is based on linguistic and literary theory.<sup>393</sup> Ricoeur provides this through the resources of narrative theory.

Ricoeur's thesis is that narration, through the mediation of history and fiction, succeeds in bringing phenomenological time and cosmic time together, thus offering a partial resolution to the aporias of time.<sup>394</sup> History and fiction, in different ways, mediate between cosmic time and lived time. History does this by elaborating a third time—historical time. Fiction does this through its imaginative variations.

The way that history refigures time is through the inscription of lived time upon cosmic time. This inscription is done through a third time,

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<sup>390</sup> Ricoeur alternatively calls lived time as phenomenological time, psychic time, human time, or mortal time; and cosmic time as time of the world, objective time, ordinary time, or universal time, based on the terminologies used in Augustine, Husserl, and Heidegger.

<sup>391</sup> Severson, *Time, Death and Eternity*, 106.

<sup>392</sup> See *TN* 3:12–96.

<sup>393</sup> Vanhoozer, "Philosophical Antecedents," 44–45.

<sup>394</sup> *TN* 3:4.



which Kemp describes as the time of reconciliation, because it “comprises both the lived imagination of time and the objectively controlled dating of time.”<sup>395</sup> This third time, called by Ricoeur “historical time” and by Benveniste “chronicle time,” can be glimpsed through “reflective instruments” which act as connectors between these two opposite poles.<sup>396</sup> These connectors are the calendar, the phenomenon of the succession of generations, and the notion of the trace. Through these connectors, the time of life is imprinted over the unidirectional line of physical days, months, and years, and thus bridges the gap between lived time and physical time.

The time of the calendar is connected to physical time and phenomenological time, in that it is based both on natural phenomena and on a significant event in the life of the community, and exhibits both the unidirectional movement of physical time and the bidirectional movement of phenomenological time.<sup>397</sup> Calendar or chronicle time though has a significance of its own that is not derived from either cosmic or lived time. This third time comes from the idea of an axial moment, the founding event upon which chronicle time is derived. The axial moment gives significance to both physical time and lived time—to physical time in that every event acquires a position in relation to this axial moment, measured physically in days, months, and years; to lived time, in that these dated events help to situate the incidents of personal and interpersonal life.<sup>398</sup>

The second connector, the phenomenon of the succession of generations, functions in a similar way to the calendar. Here the basis of the third time is biological, rather than astronomical, representing brute facts—birth, aging, death, procreation—all measured in terms of the units of the calendar: days, months, years. The succession of the dead by the living, however, does not only connote physical/biological replacement by virtue of the average life-span, but also contains other ideas: departure of the old bearers of culture, transmission of the acquired culture (heritage), and changes in terms of new questions and innovations, all of which are better expressed in the more intellectual phenomenon of contemporaries, predecessors and successors.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Kemp, “Ethics and Narrativity,” 384.

<sup>396</sup> *TN* 3:104.

<sup>397</sup> *TN* 3:106–8.

<sup>398</sup> *TN* 3:108.

<sup>399</sup> *TN* 3:109–116.

The most significant connector for Ricoeur is the notion of the trace, the “vestige that a human being or an animal has left on the place where it is passed.”<sup>400</sup> It is because a trace is left that archives are instituted and documents are collected. Ricoeur stresses the double character of the trace as a *passage* and a *mark*. The idea of a passage focuses on the one who passed, while a mark puts into the forefront the material remains of the one who passed. The first emphasizes the subject and the second, the object. The paradox is that the trace is visible in the present; yet the vestige or mark indicates the passage of something that is past. This double character of the trace bespeaks the connection between two perspectives of time—the empirical and the existential—focusing on both object and subject, and both past and present.<sup>401</sup>

Unlike history, which is tied to the constraints of cosmological time, fiction has lost all its moorings with chronological time. Because of this, fiction has more freedom to explore the varieties of temporal experience. “Each fictive temporal experience unfolds its world, and each of these worlds is singular, incomparable, unique.”<sup>402</sup> References to historical events, characters, and dates indeed abound in fiction. However, these have been “neutralized,” in the sense that they no longer fulfill “the function of standing for the historical past,” but are fictionalized along with all the other imaginary characters and scenes.<sup>403</sup> This enables fiction to respond to the gap between phenomenological time and cosmological time by engaging in “imaginative variations” that would construe the relationship between the two in inventive ways.<sup>404</sup>

There is a dissymmetry then in the way history and fiction propose a solution to the problems of time. History tends to blunt the edge of the aporias by suggesting a time of conciliation, that is, historical time. In contrast, fiction sharpens it, but in doing so, makes the aporias productive.<sup>405</sup> Nevertheless, history and fiction have something in common in that, as narrative modes, they are both involved in mediating between cosmic time and lived time.

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<sup>400</sup> Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (7 vols.; Paris: Gallimard, 1964–65), 7:1164–65, quoted by Ricoeur in *TN* 3:119.

<sup>401</sup> *TN* 3:116–26.

<sup>402</sup> *TN* 3:128.

<sup>403</sup> *TN* 3:129.

<sup>404</sup> Ricoeur illustrates how these “imaginative variations on time” are worked out in the novels he discusses in *TN* 2:100–52.

<sup>405</sup> *TN* 3:138–39.

*Refiguration of the "Real"*. The big gap between history and fiction can be seen in their referential claims. A historical narrative diverges from fiction in that the former sets up different expectations from the reader and different promises from the author: the reader expects to read about events that actually happened, and the author, by writing a historical narrative, promises to fulfill the reader's expectations.<sup>406</sup> History uses documents and archives as evidence, while fiction disregards this material proof. Thus, there is an "irreducible asymmetry" in the truth-claims of each.<sup>407</sup>

However, Ricoeur believes that the referential moment that distinguishes history from fiction cannot be found by concentrating on the literary form of the narrative alone.<sup>408</sup> Rather, one must reconstruct the link between the narrative and the events that it represents by an indirect route that goes by way of explanation/understanding, through the documentary phase, which then refers back to testimony and to declarative memory.<sup>409</sup> These three phases of the historiographical operation—documentation, explanation/understanding, and the representation or literary phase—are not successive, but are interwoven with one another.<sup>410</sup>

Because memory in its declarative phase is characterized by reflexivity—one remembers what one has seen, experienced or learned<sup>411</sup>—the narrative form that declarative memory<sup>412</sup> takes is that of testimony, an attestation that something has happened in the past.<sup>413</sup> "I was there, and this was what happened." There are two sides to testimony that distinguish it from other types of narrative. First, there is the assertion that the reported event is factually true. Second, the authenticity of the reported event depends on the trustworthiness of the witness. The judgment of trustworthiness, however, is only made possible because of a dialogical situation, in which the witness testifies before someone who evaluates the testimony, accepts it, and accredits it.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> *MHF*, 261, 275.

<sup>407</sup> *TN* 3:157; "Narrative Function," 288–89; "On Interpretation," 180.

<sup>408</sup> *MHF*, 253.

<sup>409</sup> *MHF*, 244, 254.

<sup>410</sup> *MHF*, 136–37, 234–35.

<sup>411</sup> *MHF*, 36.

<sup>412</sup> See pp. 61–62 above for the meaning of declarative memory.

<sup>413</sup> *MHF*, 146.

<sup>414</sup> *MHF*, 163–64.

When testimony, which is originally oral, is written down, and deposited in institutions devoted to its preservation and classification, testimony passes into archives. Once written, testimonies become detached from both author and addressee.<sup>415</sup> Nonetheless, they still take on the character of a trace, which preserves the memory of the one who has passed, as marked by the material remains.<sup>416</sup> These traces of the past, as they are preserved in archives, provide documentary proof to the work of the historian. Thus, “testimony constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history.”<sup>417</sup> But testimony is not only foundational to the historian’s documentary proof; it will reappear again in the written representation of the past through historical narrative.<sup>418</sup> Before the written/literary phase, however, documentary proof must first pass through the phase of explanation/understanding. Explanation/understanding in the historical operation has to do with providing causal or teleological explanations for historical phenomena.<sup>419</sup>

The interplay of memory, testimony, and narrative returns to the foreground in what Ricoeur calls the “representative phase” of the historical operation, that is, the putting into written form the historian’s representation of the past.<sup>420</sup> However, in the use of narrative as the history’s mode of representation, the problems that plagued memory as “representation of the image”<sup>421</sup> are confounded: “How are we to preserve the difference in principle between the image of the absent as unreal and the image of the absent as prior?”<sup>422</sup> First, the emplotment structure of narrative tends toward closure, and thus, toward the exclusion of extralinguistic reference.<sup>423</sup> Second, historical narrative also uses the same rhetorical forms as fiction and utilizes the imagination to represent the past.<sup>424</sup> In its search for readability, historical narrative must seek visibility, that is, give the readers the sight to see by the use

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<sup>415</sup> *MHF*, 166–69.

<sup>416</sup> Cf. *TN* 3:116–26. Not all traces are written. There are “vestiges of the past” that reside in material objects such as coins, tools, sculptures, remains of buildings, etc. These are “unwritten testimonies,” to be distinguished from oral testimonies (*MHF*, 170).

<sup>417</sup> *MHF*, 21.

<sup>418</sup> *MHF*, 161.

<sup>419</sup> *MHF*, 182–85.

<sup>420</sup> *MHF*, 136.

<sup>421</sup> See pp. 60, 63–64.

<sup>422</sup> *MHF*, 238.

<sup>423</sup> *MHF*, 237, 247, 276.

<sup>424</sup> *MHF*, 251.

of imagination.<sup>425</sup> All these obscure the differences between history and fiction, thus making historical narrative always open to the suspicion of having a “referential illusion.”<sup>426</sup>

Ricoeur believes that it is only through the confrontation between testimonies that history can fulfill its function of “standing for” the past, not in the sense of an exact resemblance of the events that it recounts, but in a metaphorical and analogical relation to the past.<sup>427</sup> Thus, in the final analysis, according to Ricoeur, “we have nothing better than our memory to assure ourselves of the reality of our memories—we have nothing better than testimony and criticism of testimony to accredit the historian’s representation of the past.”<sup>428</sup>

Unlike history, fiction does not have a referent in terms of object-events in the past that it seeks to represent. Because of this, fiction has often been regarded as “unreal.” However, fiction, too, has a reference, only that its reference must be understood in a broader way—as productive reference. Fiction does not *reproduce* reality, but it *invents* and *discovers* it, hence the term, productive reference.<sup>429</sup>

History’s reference to the past can be described as “standing for” or “taking the place of.” Historians have a feeling of indebtedness to the past, and the desire to do justice to the past. By writing history, they are able to pay their dues to the dead, the people of the past, and “to ‘render its due’ to what is and to what once was.”<sup>430</sup> Ricoeur explores three different angles by which the rendering of the past can be construed, based on the significance of the trace. The past can be regarded as the Same, as the Other, or as Analogous to historical discourse.

First, the past can be regarded based on identity, that is, history is conceived as a reenactment of the past. This involves separating the “thought” of the event from its physical features, and based on this thought, one rethinks and reconstructs the original chain of events. This reenactment is then seen as identical with the original thought.<sup>431</sup>

<sup>425</sup> *MHF*, 237, 262–63.

<sup>426</sup> *MHF*, 249–50.

<sup>427</sup> *MHF*, 279. This will be discussed below on pp. 78–79.

<sup>428</sup> *MHF*, 278.

<sup>429</sup> “Function of Fiction,” 120–21.

<sup>430</sup> *TN* 3:143, 152, 157.

<sup>431</sup> The detailed process for such reenactment is as follows, based on R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956). First, based on documentary evidence, the historian separates the “inner face” of the event, which is called “thought,” from its “outer face,” which refers to the physical events. This thought includes the intentions, motivations, and desires of agents. Second, through the use of

Ricoeur critiques this view on the grounds “that historians do not know the past at all but only their own thought about the past.”<sup>432</sup> He believes that the act of rethinking the past abolishes temporal distance, and the notion of identity makes the “re” in the reenactment irrelevant.

The past can also be regarded as the Other, so that history is understood as “an affirmation of otherness, a restoration of temporal distance, even an apology for difference.”<sup>433</sup> There are several versions of this view, of increasing degrees of radicality. They have in common the distancing of the present from the past. Ricoeur’s objection to this is that the past is seen in terms of a logical distance instead of a temporal one, and therefore non-narrative. In addition, “the otherness of the past in relation to the present” is emphasized more than “the survival of the past in the present.”<sup>434</sup>

The third perspective, which Ricoeur finds the most illuminating, is to view the past as Analogous, “a resemblance between relations rather than between terms per se.”<sup>435</sup> On this, he draws from Hayden White’s tropology.<sup>436</sup> Historical discourse is marked by “a double allegiance.” On one hand, it has to be consistent with the information given in the documents; on the other hand, it works within the constraints of narrative plot types.<sup>437</sup> To figure out what really happened, the historian must put the events in a narrative framework, based on the documents. According to White, this narrative framework is informed by four basic tropes: metonymy, synecdoche, irony, and metaphor, of which the former three are variants of the last, the metaphor. Thus, the relationship of historical narrative to the past is a metaphorical one, and is not one of reduplication or reproduction.<sup>438</sup>

Ricoeur thinks that White’s theory of tropes satisfies the relation of Analogous in terms of history’s relationship to the “real” past. He believes, however, that the Analogous must be put in a dialectic with

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historical imagination, the historian rethinks the original thought of agents, and based on this, reconstructs a chain of events. Lastly, after subjecting the reconstruction to the rules of coherence (which include agreement with the documents), the re-enactment must be seen as “numerically identical” with the initial thought (*TN* 3:144–46).

<sup>432</sup> *TN* 3:146.

<sup>433</sup> *TN* 3:147.

<sup>434</sup> *TN* 3:149.

<sup>435</sup> *TN* 3:151.

<sup>436</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory and The Tropic of Discourse* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

<sup>437</sup> *TN* 3:152.

<sup>438</sup> *TN* 3:153–54.

the other types of relationship, that of, the Same and the Other. Without this dialectic, “White’s tropology runs the risk of wiping out the boundary between fiction and history.”<sup>439</sup> Thus, along with rhetorical procedures, attention must be given to the referential intentionality of history, in that historical discourse is subjected to the constraints of known documents.

In summarizing history’s debt to the past, Ricoeur reiterates the importance of the interplay between the Same, the Other, and the Analogous. He says: “In the hunt for what has been, analogy does not operate alone but in connection with identity and otherness.”<sup>440</sup> The Analogous brings together both reenactment and distanciation, so that “being-as is both to be and not to be.”<sup>441</sup>

Fiction does not have this debt to the past. Instead, what corresponds to the *standing-for* in history is the function of fiction in revealing and transforming everyday praxis, while the counterpart of the historian’s debt to the past is the artist’s vision of the world, which acts as a constraint on the freedom of the artist’s imagination.<sup>442</sup> The function of transformation, however, is actualized only through the mediation of reading. Even though at the configuration stage the text already projects a world, this world “remains in suspension” and is only realized as the world of the text and the world of the reader intersect in the act of reading. Ricoeur emphasizes: “It is only in reading that the dynamism of configuration completes its course. And it is beyond reading, in effective action, instructed by the works handed down, that the configuration of the text is transformed into refiguration.”<sup>443</sup> Thus, there are two necessary components to refiguration in fiction: the act of reading and effective action.

Ricoeur discusses several theories of reading, and explores how they contribute to the problem of refiguration. He begins with the pole of authorial persuasion, then deals with the inscription of the reading strategy in the literary work itself, and ends with the response of the reader as an individual subject or as a community.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> *TN* 3:154.

<sup>440</sup> *TN* 3:155.

<sup>441</sup> *TN* 3:155.

<sup>442</sup> *TN* 3:158, 177.

<sup>443</sup> *TN* 3:159.

<sup>444</sup> *TN* 3:160. This is discussed in more detail on pp. 234–35.

In spite of the difference in the reference of history and fiction, there are parallels in the way they realize their respective references. First of all, although Ricoeur primarily utilizes the theories of reading in relation to the work of refiguration by fiction, these theories can also be applied to reading history. He says: "All forms of writing, including historiography, take their place within an extended theory of reading."<sup>445</sup> Moreover, several features of the dialectical structure of refiguration operate in both history and fiction.

First is the dialectic between freedom and constraint. At first glance, it seems that only history is constrained by its debt to the past, while fiction has complete creative freedom for its imaginative variations. Ricoeur, however, argues that fiction is no less marked by a feeling of debt, but this debt is not with the past, but with the artist's vision of the world. He says: "Free from the constraints of documentary proof, fiction is bound internally by the very thing that it projects itself. . . . [T]he freedom of the imaginative variation is communicated only by being cloaked in the constraining power of a vision of the world."<sup>446</sup> Yet the paradox of this constrained freedom is that "in the moment of clarification and purification" (catharsis), "readers are rendered free in spite of themselves."<sup>447</sup>

Second is the dialectic of the Same, the Other, and the Analogous. According to Ricoeur, these angles by which one can regard history's relationship to the past also operate in the reader's relationship to a fictional text. The element of the Same plays in the rhetoric of fiction, as the implied author seeks to abolish the distance between himself or herself and the reader. On the other hand, the otherness of the text is emphasized, as readers, in resisting the prescriptions embedded in the text, create a distance between the expectations of the text and their own expectations. The ideal reading, however, is closer to the analogical relation, in which there is a "convergence of writing and reading," of identity and otherness.<sup>448</sup> This occurs when a "fusion of horizons" occurs between "the expectations created by the text and those contributed by reading."<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> *TN* 3:180.

<sup>446</sup> *TN* 3:177.

<sup>447</sup> *TN* 3:178.

<sup>448</sup> Ricoeur connects this with Gadamer's fusion of horizons (*TN* 3:178).

<sup>449</sup> *TN* 3:178.



The last two dialectics apply more to fiction than to history, but nevertheless can be utilized in limited ways in history. One is the dialectic that arises from the relationship of communicability and reference. On one hand, for a work to communicate, a text must have a reference, a world that it projects, which constitutes its horizon. On the other hand, communicability is a “characteristic of reading-in-common,” that is, it is the reading community which shapes the development of the public’s reading taste, and hence, the reception of a new work.<sup>450</sup>

The last dialectic involves the status of reading as both a stasis and an impetus, which underscores the link as well as the disruption between “the imaginary world of the text and the actual world of readers.” It is a stasis in that reading is “an interruption in the course of action,” since the readers, in sharing the imaginary world of the text, become as fictive as the characters themselves. Yet it is also an impetus to new action, as readers incorporate their readings into their vision of the world. In the first one, reading becomes “a place where they come to rest”; in the second, “it is a medium they cross through.” Paradoxically, says Ricoeur, “the more readers become unreal in their reading, the more profound and far-reaching will be the work’s influence on social reality.”<sup>451</sup>

*Interweaving Reference.* Ricoeur shows that history and fiction have interweaving or cross-reference, in that they borrow from each other their respective referential claims. History borrows from fiction the use of imagination, and fiction borrows from history the use of the narrative past. Ricoeur, however, is not indiscriminately fusing the two together. Rather, each narrative mode remains distinct (as can be seen from the language of “borrowing”). On the side of history, he says “the imaginary is incorporated into the intended having-been, without weakening the ‘realist’ aspect of this intention.”<sup>452</sup> On the other hand, although fiction uses the narrative past and recounts probable events that could have happened in the past, it is still a fictive past.

History is quasi-fictive in that it borrows from fiction its employment of historical imagination. This can be seen in how the past is

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<sup>450</sup> *TN* 3:178–79.

<sup>451</sup> *TN* 3:179.

<sup>452</sup> *TN* 3:181.

dated, reconstructed, refigured, and remembered. Even the most “realist” hypothesis about the historical past—“realist” in the sense that it inscribes the chronology of historical narrative onto physical time—shows the use of imagination. This can be seen in the “imaginary character of the connectors” (the calendar, the succession of generations, and the trace), which historians use to date the past. The construction of the calendar is already an inventive act, in that it combines two heterogeneous elements—the movement of physical phenomena and the significant events of individuals and communities—into one device. The perception of a link between two disparate perspectives of time can be considered a schematizing operation, emanating from productive imagination. This schematizing act operates as well in the notion of the succession of generations and in the idea of the trace. The biological fact of the succession of generations is combined with the symbolic idea of contemporaries, predecessors, and successors. The twofold character of the trace as mark and passage, hence as a sign-effect, also exhibits a complex synthetic activity. The interpretation of fossils, ruins, and artifacts is only possible through the use of imagination, which places these physical marks in a wider social and cultural context.<sup>453</sup>

In reconstructing the past as Same, Other, or Analogous, the use of imagination is also indispensable. Reenactment is only possible through the application of historical imagination. Grasping the otherness of the past and bringing it closer requires the “capacity of a subject to transport itself into an alien psychic life,”<sup>454</sup> and this requires imagination. And of course, the perception of a metaphorical relation (the Analogous) in the employment of narrative plot types to reconstruct the data found in the documents would not be possible without the imaginary.<sup>455</sup> Ricoeur argues that the dynamics operating in reading a novel also operate in reading a historical work. An element of implicit trust is established between the historian and the reader, so that a

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<sup>453</sup> *TN* 3:182–84.

<sup>454</sup> *TN* 3:185.

<sup>455</sup> *TN* 3:184–85. In refiguring the past, historical writing, as Hayden White shows, employs a poetic approach in that it borrows from literary archetypes such as tragedy, comedy, romance, irony, etc. However, Ricoeur moves beyond White by stressing that this borrowing is not just compositional but “involves a representative function of the historical imagination. We learn to see a given series of events *as* tragic, *as* comic, and so on” (*TN* 3:185). Again, this employs the language of metaphor, in which one sees the past as one or more of these literary categories, but it is not at all equivalent to them.

historian is free to render the situation as vividly as possible, without of course, relinquishing “critical vigilance” to ensure that the rendering is faithful to the sources.<sup>456</sup>

It is in remembering “epoch-making events” in the life of a community—those that provoke indignation, regret, or horror—that fiction can best serve history. There are some events (such as Auschwitz, for example) in which historical distance and ethical neutrality are no longer desirable. Fiction gives “eyes to see and weep” that would evoke the horror of the events, and ensure that it would not be forgotten.<sup>457</sup> “Fiction is placed in the service of the unforgettable.”<sup>458</sup> By utilizing the capacity of fiction to evoke “the memory of the horrible,” history pays its debt to the “victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration.”<sup>459</sup>

Fiction is quasi-historical in that it borrows from history its presentation of a quasi-past. It imitates historical narrative in the use of a past grammatical voice and in depicting what might have been. At the level of grammar, one notices that narratives are recounted in the past tense. This past tense, however, according to Harald Weinrich, is not a sign of the temporal past, but rather a signal to the reader that what he or she is reading is narrative. The historical past and the imperfect calls forth an attitude of relaxation and detachment, in contrast to the present tense of commenting, which is characterized by tension and involvement.<sup>460</sup> Without discounting the views of Weinrich, Ricoeur believes, nonetheless, that the past tense in narrative form still has a temporal function, but it has more to do with a *fictive* past rather than an *actual* past.<sup>461</sup> The events are “past facts for the narrative voice that

<sup>456</sup> *TN* 3:185–86.

<sup>457</sup> *TN* 3:187–88.

<sup>458</sup> *TN* 3:189.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>460</sup> See Harald Weinrich, *Tempus: Besprochene und erzählte Welt* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1964), which is discussed by Ricoeur in *TN* 2:66–71.

<sup>461</sup> The narrative past does make an indirect reference to the real past, but in the sense of “as if” it were past. In Ricoeur’s opinion, the narrative tenses retain an indirect relation to lived time. There is a reason why the grammatical form is preserved, even though its signification in relation to lived time has been abolished (*TN* 2:66). Hence, the fictive past makes an oblique reference to the real past through the process of neutralization or suspension, in which the use of the preterite, which signals entry into the narrative world, communicates the “as if” it were past. The temporal intention of the tenses is also preserved in the perspectives of anticipation, retrospection, and correspondence since they presuppose temporal linearity (*TN* 2:73–75). The past

addresses itself to the reader.”<sup>462</sup> It is in this way that fiction resembles history in recounting past events, albeit fictive ones.

Another affinity that fiction has with history lies in the way fiction has to do with the probable. In order for fiction to draw the reader into the story, there must be some relation to verisimilitude. This resemblance to the real, however, is different from history’s relation to the past. Whereas history’s refiguration deals with “what has been,” fiction’s refiguration is in terms of “what might have been.”<sup>463</sup> And this “what might have been” “includes both the potentialities of the ‘real’ past and the ‘unreal’ possibilities of pure fiction.”<sup>464</sup> Thus, “the quasi-past of fiction becomes the detector of possibilities buried in the actual past.”<sup>465</sup> A fictional narrative then could have been a historical narrative if the possibilities it projects had been realized.

### *First Testament Narratives: Between History and Fiction*

The issue that confronts us regarding First Testament narratives is their status between these two broad narrative modes. Are they primarily to be regarded as history or as fiction?

On one level, Ricoeur’s argument that both history and fiction belong to the same narrative mode is helpful, in that one can employ the same approach to both, by virtue of narrative. Thus, even without resolving the issue of whether First Testament narratives are history or fiction, one can still proceed by using a general approach to all narratives.<sup>466</sup> At the

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tense then of the narrative acts as a “metaphorical transition that preserves what it supersedes” (*TN* 2:75).

<sup>462</sup> *TN* 3:190. This narrative voice is identified with the implied author, the fictive disguise of the real author.

<sup>463</sup> *TN* 3:190–91.

<sup>464</sup> *TN* 3:192.

<sup>465</sup> *TN* 3:191–92.

<sup>466</sup> Dan Stiver points this out in relation to the Gospels in “Ricoeur, Speech-Act Theory, and the Gospels as History,” in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew et al.; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 50–72; cf. Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur*, 123–24. See also John van den Hengel, “Jesus Between Fiction and History,” in *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur* (ed. David E. Klemm and William Schweiker; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 133–53; Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 54–63; Timothy Donald Fletcher Maddox, “Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* as a Model for Historical Reference in Biblical Narrative,” (Th. M thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992); and Gregory Laughery, “Ricoeur on History, Fiction, and Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew et al.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 339–57.

configurative stage, this would involve analyzing how the operation of emplotment—the interplay of concordance and discordance, of order and succession, and of sedimentation and innovation—is worked out in the text. At the refigurative stage, this would entail the use of the theories of reading, which Ricoeur says are pertinent to both historical and fictional narratives. One can also explore the role of imagination in both narrative modes, whether in the textual configurations of the text, or in the actual refigurations of the reader.

On another level, however, even though history and fiction belong to the same narrative mode, they are still distinct in many ways. In the configurative stage, history is not as free to engage in imaginative variations as is the case with fiction, since history's narration is constrained by documents and material evidence. In the refigurative stage, the dynamics of transformation operating in each mode are not the same. The way they refigure time is different. History pays its debt to the past, while fiction to the artist's vision of the world. History deals with the "real" past, with "what has been," while fiction with the fictive past, with "what might have been." Productive reference, although pertaining to history to some degree, has more latitude in fiction than in history. Because of these differences, it is important to address the issue whether First Testament narratives can be considered history or fiction.

A proliferation of works in the past two decades has shown conclusively the literary artistry of Hebrew narrative.<sup>467</sup> This literary artistry includes imaginative variations in the treatment of time.<sup>468</sup> Hebrew narratives share fiction's capacity to evoke a response from its readers because of its artistic quality and its free use of creative imagination, so that "the writer could manipulate his inherited material with sufficient freedom and sufficient firmness of authorial purpose ... with the kind of subtle cogency we associate with the conscious artistry of the narrative

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<sup>467</sup> Among these are: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); David Gunn and Dana Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983); Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978). See also Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), and Shimon Bar-eprat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989).

<sup>468</sup> Standard handbooks in Hebrew narrative include an analysis of time. See Jean Louis Ska, "Our Fathers Have Told Us": *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990), 7–17; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 264–320; Bar-eprat, *Narrative Art*, 143–84.

mode designated by prose fiction.”<sup>469</sup> Yet this “particularizing imagination” goes hand in hand with a historical impulse; for this reason, Robert Alter calls these narratives “historicized prose fiction.”<sup>470</sup> Alter thinks that “fiction was the principal means which the biblical authors had at their disposal for realizing history.”<sup>471</sup> Thus, “biblical narrative generally proves to be either fiction laying claim to a place in the chain of causation and the realm of moral consequentiality that belong to history...or history given the imaginative definition of fiction.”<sup>472</sup>

Yet, even some of those who acknowledge the artistry of the biblical narratives, still believe that they belong under the rubric of historiography. Meir Sternberg, for example, in numerous studies on the literary artistry of Hebrew narratives, asserts that biblical narrative is historiographic because of its communicative design. Sternberg believes that the category of fiction or history is not determined by a narrative’s formal markers or by the correspondence to truth of its statements, but by its communicative function.<sup>473</sup> The biblical narratives, through historical memory, seek to address “a people defined in terms of their past,” and this “remembrance of the past devolves on the present and determines the future.”<sup>474</sup> For this reason, biblical narratives should properly be considered historiography. In the same way, Baruch Halpern considers biblical narratives as historiography because he believes that this is the author’s primary intention. “We call a narrative history on the basis of its author’s perceived intentions in writing, the author’s claim that the account is accurate in its particulars, the author’s sincerity.”<sup>475</sup> The problem, however, is that aside from formal markers in the text, we have no way of accessing the author’s communicative intention, and formal markers can be interpreted in different ways.

In fact, there is unevenness by which different sections of the First Testament narrative literature relate to history. James Barr notes that some sections come close to history-writing, and can be sources of reliable evidence for the period in which they are set. Others, however,

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<sup>469</sup> Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 32.

<sup>470</sup> Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 24–25.

<sup>471</sup> Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 32.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 30.

<sup>474</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 31.

<sup>475</sup> Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 8.

contain more legendary and mythical materials.<sup>476</sup> Thus, the narrative corpus “spirals back and forward across history, sometimes coming closer to it, sometimes going farther away from it.”<sup>477</sup> It also moves back and forth “between human causation and divine causation, between the statement and description of events in entirely human terms...and the statement of events in a fashion utilizing express and large-scale divine intervention.”<sup>478</sup> Moreover, it shows a general lack of critical evaluation of sources and reports, which is an inherent procedure of historiography.<sup>479</sup> There is indeed an interest in the past, but far from being merely antiquarian, the recounting of the past is future-oriented and directed toward the fulfillment of God’s promises.<sup>480</sup> Because of these elements, Barr thinks that the narrative corpus is properly called “story,” rather than “history.”<sup>481</sup>

Ricoeur himself considers religious language, including biblical texts as “poetic texts” in that they have the power of redescribing reality

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<sup>476</sup> James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 6–7. He says: “Indeed, rather than say that the dominance of history is characteristic of the Old Testament, it would be more correct to say that what is characteristic is its peculiarly blended mixture of historical (or partly historical) narration with mythical and legendary elements” (*Scope and Authority*, 7). Cf. Barr’s *Old and New in Interpretation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 69–70; John Goldingay, *Models of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 39–42.

<sup>477</sup> Barr, *Scope and Authority*, 8.

<sup>478</sup> Barr, *Scope and Authority*, 7. He sums up: “[T]he Old Testament tells acts, events, speeches, thoughts, conversations, and all sorts of varied information, in a highly varied complex. The narrative material has clear, though uneven, marking of temporal sequence. It is characterized by chronological data, by family genealogies, by references back to earlier events, and by an unmistakable progression. It is thus like history, in that it reads in a temporal progression and tells a story which is cumulative from beginning along a temporal scale. The nearness to history, however, should not be exaggerated. From some points of view what is related is rather a story than a history. The relatedness to history varies from section to section, extending from (let us say) the Flood story, where the relation to history is probably nil, to a story like that of Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Jerusalem, where the relation is quite close” (quoted in James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 345–46; originally in *Old and New*, 81).

<sup>479</sup> Barr, *Scope and Authority*, 8. Barr points out that “history,” as a classifying term, is not found in the Bible. History is a construct that developed from Greek historiography and one of its essential characteristics is the critical evaluation of sources (*Old and New*, 71).

<sup>480</sup> Barr, *Scope and Authority*, 35–36. Cf. Goldingay, *Models of Scripture*, 65: “The narratives in scripture speak in the past tense and refer to things that actually happened in the past, but they covertly relate to the future. By portraying a past or imaginary or other world they issue a challenge, or an invitation that opens up a future or a possible world.”

<sup>481</sup> Barr, *Scope and Authority*, 5.

and opening up possibilities for being, which is the specific quality of fiction and poetry.<sup>482</sup> Yet he recognizes the “historical mind” of ancient Israel, in that its people understood themselves through the historical traditions that they themselves formed and received.<sup>483</sup> However, this historical understanding, according to Ricoeur, is manifested not only in writings that can be considered historiography, but also in the entire range of narrative forms as well as in non-narrative texts that have been incorporated into the narrative complex. The presence of other forms, which cannot be strictly considered historiography, leads Ricoeur to describe the narrative that frames the First Testament as “history-like”<sup>484</sup> rather than as history.<sup>485</sup> Here, he is defining history in the sense of historiography, as texts which have a structural and thematic kinship with early Greek historiography.<sup>486</sup> The term “history-like” does not mean, however, that Ricoeur considers biblical narratives as fictional. He says, “It is not fiction because there is no feeling of fable-invention as the one that Aristotle ascribes to poetry writing. It is not history because the purpose of history writing according to documentary evidence is also not part of the writer’s intention.”<sup>487</sup> The problem is that Ricoeur’s division of narrative into just two major modes does not help in working out the configuration and refiguration of a narrative framework which is neither history nor fiction, and which encompasses a diversity of narrative forms, as well as other non-narrative genres.<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in *FS*, 43.

<sup>483</sup> Here Ricoeur draws from the work of Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel’s Historic Traditions* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; trans. D. M. G. Stalker; 2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>484</sup> He takes this term from Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>485</sup> “Myth and History,” in *ER* 10:279.

<sup>486</sup> Ricoeur traces history’s break with myth as a distinct type of discourse in the writings of Herodotus and those that preceded him. History, in contrast to myth, is characterized by an investigation into human causes and responsible agents. Ricoeur disputes the conception that the distinction of history from myth is that history views time in a linear way, while that of myth is cyclical. Instead, the split in time is between the time of the gods (myth) and the time of men (history). See “Myth and History,” 275–77. For a fuller discussion of Ricoeur’s view of history in relation to the biblical narrative, see Van den Hengel, “Between Fiction and History,” 138–40.

<sup>487</sup> “Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties,” in *FS*, 244.

<sup>488</sup> Ricoeur himself shows the importance of considering the various genres of the biblical text and the effect of these genres’ conceptualities and temporalities on one another. See “Myth and History,” 277; “Biblical Time,” in *FS*, 167–80.



Several issues arise from the above discussion. First, there seems to be a disagreement on how to define historiography.<sup>489</sup> Both Ricoeur and Barr share the view that historiography should only be properly applied to writings which have affinities to Greek historiography, which includes a critical evaluation of documentary evidence. On the other hand, Sternberg and Halpern think that the antiquarian interest of the biblical writers is enough to qualify the writings as historiographical. They argue that the biblical writers have a different conception of historiography and this should not be confused with the modern understanding of historical writing. However, “our grasp of the sources, literary conventions, and the social location of writer and audience is often minimal,”<sup>490</sup> and so a great problem lies in ascertaining what they consider as fiction and what as history, or whether these categories exist at all.

Second, Ricoeur and Barr rightly point out the existence of a range of narrative and non-narrative genres that are included in the narrative corpus. Although there are overlaps, the stories in Gen 1–11 generally differ from the stories of the patriarchs, and differ still from the stories in Samuel and Kings. At the same time, there are other non-narrative genres such as poems, laws, sayings, etc., which are interspersed throughout the narrative. Thus, to lump all of them under the category of historiography would efface these distinctions. Historiographic writing, of course (as well as fictional works), may include other genres under its rubric, but it is arguable whether historiography is the best frame under which all the other genres could be subsumed. The narrative frame itself, in spite of its generally temporal sequence, shows an unevenness that precludes it being solely identified as historiography. The fact that scholars have attributed parts of the narrative to various sources reveals this unevenness, for it shows that the parts diverge sufficiently from each other to the point that they are attributed to different hands. Thus, perhaps there is no other over-arching term to describe the narrative literature of the First Testament than the loose

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<sup>489</sup> There are several ways in which the term “historiography” has been used, according to John van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 209: first, as a literary form pertaining to the narration of past events; second, as referring to the nature and composition of biblical histories, such as the deuteronomistic history or the Yahwist; and third, as a mental state, in which historical consciousness is contrasted with a mythical mindset.

<sup>490</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 6.

terms “narrative” or “story.”<sup>491</sup> Because of the variety of material, each section would have to be approached on a case-to-case basis in terms of its relationship to history or fiction.

The use of Ricoeur’s own characteristics for history and fiction shows further the ambiguity of the First Testament’s narrative corpus as straddling the narrative’s two modes. On one hand, it shares history’s debt to the past—to a lifestyle and people who live in the “real” past. Yet at the same time, it has the power to redescribe reality, an operation that is more akin to fiction. Like history, it employs, in some parts, the time of the calendar and the succession of generations, and the presence of a trace can be seen in the archaeological remains of biblical sites, marking the passage of what is past. Yet it also engages in imaginative variations of time. Although having an over-all chronological sequence, the smaller stories within the narrative show a range of temporalities that exploits the dominance of configuration over succession. Thus, they make use of the phenomena of suspense (as in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac), repetition (as in the so-called doublets, like the sister-wife stories, or the double anointing of Saul as king), foreshadowing (as when it is said in advance that Jacob will supplant his brother Esau or that Sisera will fall into the hands of a woman), and retrospection (as when Joseph looks back and sees a greater purpose behind his brothers’ evil actions against him).

In what ways are the relationships of the Same, the Other, and the Analogous worked out in First Testament narrative? Is the relationship primarily in terms of the relationship of a historical text to the past, or in terms of the relationship of a reader to a fictive text? Both dynamics are operating in First Testament narrative. There is a sense in which, like history, it seeks to reenact the past, yet in an imaginative way that emphasizes its otherness. It also utilizes narrative plot types that create a relationship analogous to the past. Thus, the past can be read using the plots of comedy, tragedy, and other narrative modes.<sup>492</sup>

Yet these dynamics operate in the relationship of the narrative to the reader as well. The text has continuities as well as discontinuities with the experiences of the readers. Readers identify themselves with some

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<sup>491</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 6. They think that narrower terms than narrative or story prove of limited use in discussing biblical narrative, especially if some of the sub-genres are seen to have a more historiographical purpose.

<sup>492</sup> See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, for these narrative modes.

of the characters' situations, beliefs, and feelings, yet there are many customs and beliefs that are strange to them. Thus, while they may grieve with Naomi for the loss of her husband, they may be baffled nonetheless by the strange custom of untying one's sandal as a way of sealing an agreement. They may sympathize with Esau and Rebekah for their problems with their daughters-in-law, but may not comprehend why a birthright is so much valued.

First Testament narrative then is a cross between history and fiction. In some parts, it would be nearer the pole of history while in others it would be nearer to that of fiction, so that Ricoeur's notion of an "interweaving of history and fiction" can actually be seen in an actual text. As Stiver sees it, Ricoeur's thesis paves the way for relating the historical and literary dimensions of biblical narrative. It "provides a way beyond the impasse of a heavily historical concern found in traditional historical-critical approaches versus a nonhistorical literary approach."<sup>493</sup> Both approaches then can be used in interpreting a narrative text.<sup>494</sup> Literary techniques are used to understand the narrative structure, while historical-critical methods, and in some cases semiological approaches, are used to provide explanations that would advance the narrative understanding of the text. Thus, Exod 4:18–26 shares some of the qualities of fiction, so that literary approaches are appropriate in expounding its configurations. Nonetheless, it also pays a debt to the past, to a people who had suffered and had needed deliverance, and to an individual who had gone through a terrifying, near-death experience.

Rather than seeing it as a disadvantage, the in-between character of First Testament narrative between the two narrative modes strengthens its nature as a "witnessing tradition."<sup>495</sup> In its remembrance of the past, it pays its dues to the ancient fathers and mothers, and testifies to God's dealings with them in their foibles and sufferings. In its use of imaginative variations, it is able to explore possibilities for living, which make tradition a rich resource for surviving in the present and for coping with the future.

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<sup>493</sup> Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur*, 123.

<sup>494</sup> Goldingay, *Models of Scripture*, 29.

<sup>495</sup> Goldingay, *Models of Scripture*, 15–16, 25–26.



## CHAPTER THREE

### PREFIGURATION: SETTING THE STAGE

In this chapter, I set up the rudiments needed for a conversation between the biblical text and Ricoeur's narrative theory. I begin with an analysis of the narrative unit and a translation of Exod 4:18–26. This is followed by a discussion of some issues relating to analyzing the prefigurations of a narrative text, which is the first stage in Ricoeur's theory of emplotment (*mimesis*<sub>1</sub>). I then discuss the prefigured actions in Exod 4:18–26, first from my perspective as a real, contemporary reader of the text, and second from the perspective of the First Testament world. This will include a detailed treatment of the meaning of circumcision in the First Testament, based on Ricoeur's theory of metaphor and symbol because, as will be seen in chap. 4, this is crucial for the interpretation of the passage. The analysis of the prefigurations of Exod 4:18–26 will inform the discussion of its configuration (chap. 4) and its refiguration (chap. 5). Lastly, in this chapter, I make a short detour to speech act theory and the ethical implications of speech acts to show how an understanding of performative language can deepen one's comprehension of action at the prefiguration stage.

### THE NARRATIVE UNIT

A narrative's plot can be analyzed only as far as its beginning and ending are clearly evident. It is only then that one can ascertain the direction to which the narrative moves, and the way the different incidents impel or impede this direction. Thus, it is important to know the larger narrative in which Exod 4:18–26 is situated, and why the story is being limited to these verses. M. J. Oosthuizen points out that the limits of a text depend on the questions one asks, but they are not completely arbitrary, since they must have some justification from within the text.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Oosthuizen, "Some Thoughts" (see chap. 1, n. 24), 10, citing Shimon Bar-Efrat, "Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative," *VT* 30 (1980): 155.

The episode in Exod 4:24–26 belongs to the immediate unit of 4:18–26, which relates the account of Moses' return to Egypt. Some scholars separate vv. 18–23 from vv. 24–26,<sup>2</sup> but others consider them as one unit.<sup>3</sup> These verses are placed between two incidents whose narrative flow is interrupted by the events relating to the journey back to Egypt.<sup>4</sup> In the first incident, God becomes angry with Moses and designates Aaron as Moses' spokesperson (4:14–17). In the second incident, Aaron is shown meeting Moses and fulfilling his task as a spokesperson (4:27–31). Both incidents occur beyond the wilderness, at the mountain of God (3:1; 4:27).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the events of vv. 18–26 form a unit which acts as a transition between Moses' call (3:1–4:17) and the commencement of his mission in Egypt (4:27–31).

Exod 4:18–26 in turn is a part of the bigger narrative from 2:23–4:31.<sup>6</sup> Exod 2:23–25 introduces a problem that comes to a partial resolution in 4:29–31. In 2:23–25, the Israelites groaned (אָנָחוּ) because of their

<sup>2</sup> Martin Noth, for instance, considers 2:11–4:23 as a unit because it frames Moses' flight to Midian and his subsequent return to Egypt. He then considers 4:24–26 as part of a unit comprising 4:24–6:1, which relates the immediate events upon Moses' return. Noth, however, bases his divisions primarily on geographical location rather than on the flow of the story. See his *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 30. Cf. Werner Schmidt, *Exodus* (BKAT 2/4; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 208–34.

<sup>3</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), 107–22; Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 51; Gisela Schneeman, "Die Deutung und Bedeutung der Beschneidung nach Exodus 4, 24–26," *CV* 32 (1989): 27.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus 4:24–6," *VT* 36 (1986): 450. Logically, 4:27–28 follows after 4:17. See also William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 195; H. Kosmala, "The 'Bloody Husband,'" *VT* 12 (1962): 18; Everett Fox, *Genesis and Exodus: A New English Translation with Commentary and Notes* (New York: Schocken, 1990), 261.

<sup>5</sup> There are verbal links between the two incidents, especially 4:14 and 4:27, in which the root קרא is repeated. In 4:14, the Lord tells Moses: הִנֵּה-הוּא יֵצֵא לִקְרָאתְךָ "look, he is coming to meet you," referring to Aaron, while in 4:27 the Lord tells Aaron: לֵךְ לִקְרַאת מֹשֶׁה "Go to meet Moses." God tells Moses that Aaron would be glad to see his brother, and this is evoked when Aaron kissed his brother in greeting (Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 122). What God said he would do, which is to make Aaron the spokesperson of Moses (4:15–16), is fulfilled in the second incident (4:30). The mention of Aaron is often seen as secondary material. Cf. Noth, *Exodus*, 51; see also John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 50, 59. Even if this is the case, the link between 4:13–16 and 4:27–31 still holds.

<sup>6</sup> In setting this narrative unit, I am employing an analysis based on plot structure, in which a conflict or problem introduced at the beginning of the story comes to some sort of resolution or closure at the end of the story. This analysis is not based on division of sources or of form, but on the narrative movement or plot line. This is consistent with Ricoeur's methodology of focusing on the plot.

labor. God heard (וַיִּשְׁמַע) their groans (נִאֲקָתָם) and took notice (וַיִּרְא) of them. In 4:31, the Israelites heard (וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ) that God had visited them and had noticed (וַיִּרְא) their groaning (עֲנִיָּם). In between these two incidents, God acts by calling Moses, assigns Aaron as spokesperson because of Moses' repeated objections, and threatens the family of Moses on their way back to Egypt.

Even though the oppression of the Israelites is already mentioned in chap. 1 and God is shown working in the background to preserve lives, it is only here in 2:23–25 that God begins to operate in more overt and forceful ways to bring deliverance to the Israelites. The reason for beginning the unit at 2:23, then, is that it is only here that God, as an actively involved character, comes into the scene.<sup>7</sup> Various scholars have ended this section in 4:31, or after the first encounter with Pharaoh in 6:1 or after the second call narrative in 7:7 (or 7:13).<sup>8</sup> Chapter 5, however, begins another narrative phase in that another problem is introduced, namely, Pharaoh's obstinacy, which finds resolution only when Pharaoh lets the people go after the death of his firstborn (12:1–13:22).<sup>9</sup> For if Pharaoh had immediately let the people go after Moses' first attempt, there would have been no need for a second call, and for the sending of

<sup>7</sup> George Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (trans. Robert R. Barr; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 4. Cf. Umberto Cassuto who separates 2:23–4:31 from 1:1–22 ("The Bondage") and from 2:1–22 ("The Birth of the Savior and his Upbringing"), in *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 27–28. Houtman (*Exodus*, 1:326; see chap. 1, n. 24) sees 2:23–25 as the introduction to the next chapter about the call of Moses.

<sup>8</sup> The scope of the narrative unit proposed by different scholars varies. Most begin the unit at 3:1, especially with the introduction of a disjunctive clause at the beginning, but there is disagreement on where the unit ends. Those focusing on the call of Moses end it at 4:17 (Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 67; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 51); cf. Childs, *Exodus* (see chap. 1, n. 24), 52. There is indeed a clear break in 4:17 as can be seen in the change in scene (from the mountain of God to Jethro's household in Midian) and the change in characters (Moses and God to Moses and his family). Fretheim considers 3:1–4:17 as part of a larger narrative beginning from 3:1 and concluding in Moses' second call, which begins in 6:2 and ends in 7:7 (Fretheim) or 7:13 (Greenberg), while Werner Schmidt ends it after the conclusion of the first call in 6:1 (the same with Childs, *Exodus*, who ends the unit in 6:1, but begins it in 4:18). Houtman (*Exodus*, 1:326–27), ends the unit at 4:18, because it is only in 4:19 that Moses departs for Egypt. However, he acknowledges that it is possible to end the unit at 4:23 or 4:31. For a different division altogether, see Peter Weimar, *Die Berofung Des Mose: Literaturwissenschaftliche Analyse von Exodus 2, 23–5, 5* (Freiburg: Universitäts Verlag, 1980), who begins the unit in 2:23 but ends it in 5:5, because he sees a parallel between 2:23–3:22 and 4:1–5:5.

<sup>9</sup> The scope of the next narrative unit would then be 5:1–13:22. Chapter 14 introduces another narrative cycle in that another problem is introduced when Pharaoh pursues the trapped Israelites. This is resolved in the latter part of the chapter in the crossing of the Red Sea. Exod 15:1–18 acts as a coda, a celebrative poem to recapitulate what has happened, but it is not part of the narrative proper.

the plagues. The failure of Moses' mission in Exod 5:1–6:1 then functions to set the stage for the second commission (6:2–7:7), the plagues, the death of the firstborn, and the exodus.<sup>10</sup> Thus, 4:31 would be the natural ending of the narrative unit that begins in 2:23.

Although I am taking 2:23–4:31 as the primary narrative unit, I will also consider the broader narrative context. Setting apart the narratives dealing with the wilderness wanderings, the overarching narrative encompasses 1:1–14:31. It begins with the Israelites' oppression in Egypt and ends with their decisive deliverance at the Red Sea. The reversal of their situation from bondage and oppression to freedom and deliverance makes the narrative a complete whole. Within this broader narrative framework are four narrative cycles that show a movement from a situation of Israelite oppression or defeat to God's intervention in covert or overt ways. The four narrative units can be summarized as follows:

First Unit: God Preserves Israel (1:1–2:22)

Second Unit: God Initiates Israel's Deliverance from Egypt (2:23–4:31)

Third Unit: God Asserts Rulership through Signs and Wonders (5:1–13:22)

Fourth Unit: God Completes Israel's Deliverance from Egypt (14:1–31)

#### TRANSLATION: EXODUS 4:18–26

18 Moses went back<sup>11</sup> to Jether,<sup>12</sup> his father-in-law. He said to him: "Allow me, please,<sup>13</sup> to go back to my kinfolk<sup>14</sup> in Egypt, so that I may

<sup>10</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Reading of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 72. Fishbane thinks that 5:1 begins a narrative sequence and should not be included in the previous narrative unit because of the following reasons: (1) The scene shifts back to Egypt in chap. 5; (2) there are thematic and verbal links between chap. 5 and chap. 1, so that chap. 5 can be seen as introducing another round of oppression; and (3) chap. 5 provides the motivation for the renewed call of Moses.

<sup>11</sup> The words **וילך וישב** form a word pair, which means, "he went back." See similar usage in Ruth 1: 8, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Some mss of the Syr., Tg. Jon., and the Vulg. have **יתרו**, but **יתר** is probably just a variation of the proper name.

<sup>13</sup> When the cohortative involves an appeal to someone else's will, it expresses a wish or a request for permission to do something. See GKC § 110c; Joüon § 114a, d. In this case, the entreating sense in the **נא** becomes evident (Joüon § 105c). For similar usage, see 2 Sam 15:7; Ruth 2:2; Jer 40:15.

<sup>14</sup> Lit, **אחי** "my brothers." The phrase is ambivalent. In light of 2:11 (where **אחי** is used twice), Moses seems to be referring to his fellow Israelites, but the phrase may



see<sup>15</sup> whether they are still alive.”<sup>16</sup> Jethro said to him: “Go, be safe.”<sup>17</sup>

19 Yahweh said to Moses in Midian: “Go back to Egypt<sup>18</sup> since all the men who were seeking your life are dead.”

20 So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses took the rod of God in his hand.

21 Yahweh said to Moses, “As you go back to Egypt,<sup>19</sup> consider<sup>20</sup> all the wonders which I have placed at your disposal.<sup>21</sup> You shall execute them before Pharaoh.<sup>22</sup> I, however,<sup>23</sup> will make his heart stubborn and

also refer to Moses’ immediate relatives (his siblings and their families), since it was Aaron, Moses’ brother, who first welcomed him back (4:27).

<sup>15</sup> Final waw + indirect volitive, indicating purpose (Joüon, § 116 b3; GKC § 108d).

<sup>16</sup> It seems best to read the phrase literally, in spite of the suggestion that **וַיַּרְאָה הָעוֹדִים חַיִּים** is a general idiom referring to seeking the welfare of a person (Childs, *Exodus*, 101; Cassuto, *Exodus*, 53, citing Gen 45:3; note the translation of the NJPS “to see how they are faring”; cf. André Lacocque, *Le devenir de Dieu* [Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1967], 142). In all other occurrences, the phrase is to be taken literally (Gen 25:6; 1 Sam 20:14; 2 Sam 12:22; 2 Sam 18:14; 1 Kgs 20:32). The phrase is used several times in the Joseph story, with the literal meaning best fitting the context (Gen 43:7; 45:26, 28; Gen 46:30). Gen 43:27, 28 and 45:3 are more ambiguous, but in light of the literal meaning in almost all contexts, it is best to take the literal meaning here as well.

<sup>17</sup> **שָׁלוֹם** with the preposition **ל** and with verbs of motion like **הֵלֵךְ** means “to reach a destination safely.” See *HALOT* 4:1507–8, citing Judg 18:6; 1 Sam 1:17, 20:13, 42; 2 Kgs 5:19.

<sup>18</sup> A few mss of the Sam. Pent. have **מִצְרַיִם** instead of **מִצְרָיִם**.

<sup>19</sup> The preposition **כ** can express the simultaneity of two actions, indicating particularly the inclusion of an action in the time of another (in this case, the action of the imperative **רָאָה** is included in the time of the action of **בֹּלַכְתָּךְ**). The action of going back is durative, hence the rendering “as you go back to Egypt.” See Joüon § 166l and GKC § 164g.

<sup>20</sup> The usage of **רָאָה** in the *qal* imperative can mean “consider” (a reflective gaze). See Exod 33:3; 1 Sam 12:24; 1 Sam 25:17; Ps 9:13; 25:19; 45:11; 119:153; 119:159; Prov 6:6; Eccl 7:13, 14. Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Lit., “all the wonders which I have placed in your hand,” referring to the signs which God has empowered Moses to perform.

<sup>22</sup> Most translations (NRSV, NJPS, NIV, NASB, NKJV) put **וַעֲשִׂיתָ לְפָנַי פְּרָעָה** immediately after the imperative **רָאָה**, with **כֻּלְהֵמַפְתִּים אֲשֶׁר־שִׁמַּתִּי בְיָדְךָ** as the object of **וַעֲשִׂיתָ**, thus the translation: “See that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have put in your power.” Here **רָאָה** has the sense of “see to it,” “ensure.” This translation puts the object before the verb with a *waw* (*w-qatalti*) form and considers it as a *casus pendens*, with the *waw* functioning as a *waw* apodosis (See GKC § 112mm, 143d; Joüon § 156c). It is more natural, however, to take **כֻּלְהֵמַפְתִּים אֲשֶׁר־שִׁמַּתִּי בְיָדְךָ** as the object of the imperative **רָאָה**. In instances in which the imperative form of **רָאָה** is used, followed by a nominative clause, the action involves the matter at hand, or what is immediately taking place, rather than an action in the distant future (Gen 27:27; Deut 11:26; 1 Sam 24:14; 2 Sam 7:2). Cf. Clements’s translation: “While you are on your way to Egypt, keep in mind all the portents I have given you power to show. You shall display these before Pharaoh.” Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 28.

<sup>23</sup> The phrase begins with **וְאֲנִי**, indicating a disjunctive clause. The focus here is not on the pronoun **אֲנִי**, but on the clause after the pronoun. Whereas Moses’ part

he will not set the people free.<sup>24</sup> 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh: “Thus says Yahweh: Israel is my son, my firstborn.<sup>25</sup> 23 I have told you: Set my son<sup>26</sup> free, that he may serve me. But you have refused to set him free; here now, I am going<sup>27</sup> to slay your son, your firstborn.”

24 It happened that on the journey, at the encampment by night,<sup>28</sup> Yahweh<sup>29</sup> encountered him and sought to put him to death. 25 But Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son, and she cast it down<sup>30</sup> at his feet<sup>31</sup> saying, “Surely,<sup>32</sup> you are a bridegroom of blood<sup>33</sup>

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is to perform the wonders which God has put in his power, the response of Pharaoh is not Moses’ responsibility but God’s, and it is totally in God’s power. For a similar construction, see Exod 7:2–3.

<sup>24</sup> שלח in the *piel* is used in relation to slaves being released from slavery or captivity. See Deut 21:14; Jer 34: 9–10, 14; 40:1; 50:33 (oppressed); Isa 45:13 (exiles); Zech 9:11 (prisoners); combined with חפשי Deut 15:12; Jer 34:11,16; Isa 58:6 (oppressed).

<sup>25</sup> In Hebrew word order: בני בכרי ישראל (“My son, my firstborn is Israel”). This forms an inclusio with the last part of Yahweh’s speech בדרך בכרך (“I will slay your son, your firstborn”), highlighting the contrast between the two phrases.

<sup>26</sup> Instead of בני, the LXX has τὸν λαόν μου “my people.” This seems to be an attempt to harmonize with Exod 5:1 regarding the content of what Moses should say to Pharaoh (5:1 has “my people” instead of “my son”). “My son,” however is consistent with how Israel is described in the whole verse, with a deliberate contrast between Pharaoh’s son and Yahweh’s son.

<sup>27</sup> The verb הרג is in the form of a participle. When used in a future context, the participle functions to announce future actions or events that are imminent and sure to take place. The approaching action is presented as being already in progress. See GKC § 116p; Joüon § 121e.

<sup>28</sup> מלון generally indicates a place to spend the night, whether an open space or a lodging place. See Cornelis Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26 and Its Interpretation,” *JNSL* 11 (1983): 81–82.

<sup>29</sup> The LXX has ἄγγελος κυρίου (so with Tg. Onk. which follows the LXX), which is probably an attempt to tone down the harsh picture of Yahweh directly doing the killing. Several mss of the LXX only have ἄγγελος while those of Aq. have ὁ θεός. See G. Vermès, “Baptism and Jewish Exegesis: A New Light from Ancient Sources,” *NTS* 4 (1958): 309. For further discussion, see p. 243.

<sup>30</sup> See the discussion in pp. 202–203, for this translation.

<sup>31</sup> רגלים “feet” is also a euphemism for genitals (Isa 7:20; Ezek 16:25; Deut 28:57). See the discussion in p. 202 for the rendering “feet.” The LXX has καὶ προσέτεσεν, πρὸς τοὺς πόδας for the MT’s ותגע לרגליו. This reading is probably derived from the other meaning of נגע in the hiphil, which is to cast down or bring down, but rather than Zipporah throwing down the foreskin at somebody’s feet, Zipporah in this case is pictured as casting herself down on somebody’s feet (interpreted by the LXX to be the angel of the Lord). See further the discussion on p. 244. Cf. Fredrik Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament* (trans. Fredrick H. Cryer; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983), 47.

<sup>32</sup> The כִּי after ותאמר can simply introduce a direct speech (Joüon § 157c), but there is an emphatic sense here, which possibly introduces a solemn affirmation. See James Muilenburg, “The Linguistic and Rhetorical Usages of the Particle כִּי in the Old Testament,” *HUCA* 32 (1961): 144, n. 28, citing Gen 29:33; Josh 2:24; Judg 6:16.

<sup>33</sup> See the discussion in pp. 210–222 for the meaning of חתן דמים. The LXX has

for me.”<sup>34</sup> 26 Then he fell away<sup>35</sup> from him. At that time,<sup>36</sup> she said, “a bridegroom of blood,”<sup>37</sup> for the circumcisions.<sup>38</sup>

### THE PREUNDERSTANDING OF ACTION

According to Ricoeur, each narrative draws from a preexisting reality—the world of action—for its configurations. Without the presupposition of this practical field between authors and readers, the narrative would be unintelligible. The narrative, in the entire mimetic process, configures this prefigured order of action, and by so doing, opens up a world that can refigure the world of the reader. But even in the pre-narrative stage, mimesis is already taking place as both authors and readers interpret action according to a structural network, a symbolic system, and a temporal structure.<sup>39</sup> Competence in these three areas is needed on the part of both authors and readers, in order for the narrative to be intelligible.<sup>40</sup>

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καὶ εἶπεν ἔσται τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου “and she said, ‘the blood of the circumcision of my son held its ground.’” Thus, Zipporah is pictured as falling at the angel’s feet and presenting the blood of her son’s circumcision, understanding that this can avert the attack on Moses. Vermès reads in this a sacrificial tone, which is made more explicit in the Armenian and Ethiopic versions based on the LXX. The Armenian version says: “Behold the blood of the circumcision of my son,” while the Ethiopic reads: “May the blood of the circumcision of my son be in his place” (Vermès, “Baptism and Jewish Exegesis,” 310). An interpretation therefore has been introduced into the LXX, which seeks to make sense of Zipporah’s action as an atoning action on behalf of Moses, who presumably has been attacked because he has not been circumcised. Thus, “Moses is delivered from death by the expiatory virtue of the blood of the circumcision” (Vermès, “New Light,” 311). See pp. 244–45 for further discussion.

<sup>34</sup> I am taking the ל in לי as a preposition of advantage or benefit. See the discussion on p. 222.

<sup>35</sup> The idea of רפה in the *gal* is not just that of releasing or letting go of someone, but of a sinking back, a slackening and a relaxing of one’s hold (*BDB*, 951; *HALOT* 3:1277).

<sup>36</sup> See discussion on the function of אֵם on pp. 171–73.

<sup>37</sup> The phrase חַתָּן דְּמִים is missing in the LXX. Instead, it has διότι εἶπεν ἔσται τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου (similar to v. 25). The LXX understands the blood of the circumcision as the thing that stopped the attack from the angel of the Lord. See n. 33 above.

<sup>38</sup> The word מוֹלֵת occurs only here and is related to the verb מוֹל “to circumcise.” However, the pl. fem. form is curious and the function of the preposition ל can be read in different ways. See p. 207.

<sup>39</sup> *TN* 1:54, 64.

<sup>40</sup> Reagan, “Words and Deeds,” 341 (see chap. 2, n. 117).

Moreover, the prefigured order of action already has a prior ethical categorization.<sup>41</sup> The narrative cannot function in forming ethical identity, if it is not “rooted in the fundamental structures of practical experience.”<sup>42</sup> This ethical categorization may be reaffirmed, reinforced, modified, or changed drastically by the narrative. Thus, in order to know what ethical possibilities are opened up by Exod 4:18–26, it is necessary to delineate what actions are being shaped, what prior symbolic and ethical categorizations are given to these actions, and how their temporalities are understood.

### *The Three Features of Action*

#### *The Structural Network*

Actions cannot just be analyzed in terms of physical movements for they belong to a conceptual network that involves goals, motives, agents, consequences, circumstances, interactions, etc. “To master the conceptual network as a whole, and each term as one member of the set, is to have that competence we can call practical understanding.”<sup>43</sup> The conceptual network can be identified by asking about any action the questions: what, why, who, how, with whom, against whom. A relation of intersignification exists between the members of a set.<sup>44</sup>

Every narrative then presupposes a familiarity with the structural features of action such as agent, goal, means, circumstance, etc., on the part of both its narrator and its listener. An analysis of the prefiguration of a narrative would then involve the description of basic actions present in the narrative. These basic actions, however, are part of a network of actions which belong together, in that one action is not an isolated entity but it affects others or calls forth a response from another agent, whether of cooperation, resistance, struggle, acceptance, etc. Action, in Ricoeur’s view, means not only the act of doing something, but also

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<sup>41</sup> *TN* 1:47.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000), 98.

<sup>43</sup> *TN* 1:55.

<sup>44</sup> *TN* 1:56. At the prefiguration stage, one analyzes the paradigmatic order of action—a synchronic relationship—so that the relationship between the different members of a set is reversible. This is in contrast to what happens in the configurative stage, in which the order of action is syntagmatic—a diachronic relationship—so that the different actions in a given conceptual network must follow one another according to a given sequence.

that of being acted upon, of suffering. I have thus grouped the actions in the narrative according to a schema of action and response.

*Symbolic Mediation and Ethical Significance*

According to Ricoeur's assertion, human actions are symbolically mediated in that they are always governed by the norms of a symbolic cultural system. Ricoeur thus underscores the cultural and public character of symbols, as well as their structured character within a given symbolic system. "To understand a ritual act is to situate it within a ritual, set within a cultic system, and by degrees within the whole set of conventions, beliefs, and institutions that make up the symbolic framework of a culture."<sup>45</sup> The symbolic framework of a culture provides the rules for describing and interpreting a given action.

Symbolic mediation, however, does not only describe and interpret action. It also provides rules in term of norms, prescribing "form, order, and direction to life."<sup>46</sup> Human actions are then evaluated according to a scale of moral preferences, from which they receive different degrees of value. It is this prefigured ethical evaluation of action that is extended to the characters, thus endowing them with ethical qualities. Readers can evaluate a character's actions as either good or bad because they share with authors an understanding of the practical field that involves moral evaluation.<sup>47</sup>

*Temporality*

Temporality itself does not have an ethical dimension, yet the way in which a narrative configures time aids in creating a narrative world that can refigure the world of the reader. Human action occurs and moves through time. Thus, lived experience itself has temporal elements that call forth a narration. Hence, Ricoeur speaks of an "inchoate narrativity" already existing in practical experience.<sup>48</sup> "Everything that is recounted occurs in time, takes time, unfolds temporally; and what unfolds in time can be recounted."<sup>49</sup> There is therefore a reciprocal relationship between narrativity and temporality in that the narrative

<sup>45</sup> *TN* 1:58.

<sup>46</sup> *TN* 1:58.

<sup>47</sup> *TN* 1:58–59.

<sup>48</sup> *TN* 1:74.

<sup>49</sup> "On Interpretation," 176 (see chap. 2, n. 53). Ricoeur thinks that a temporal process can only be recognized as such if it can be put into a form of a story.

discourse becomes meaningful as it depicts the human experience of time, while the experience of time finds full expression in narrative discourse.<sup>50</sup>

How does human action express temporality? First of all, each member of a conceptual network already expresses a temporal dimension. For example, plans and projects have to do with the future, motivations and causes with the past, ongoing undertakings and sufferings with the present.<sup>51</sup>

But more than this, lived experience already shows a pre-narrative temporal dimension in that it is not just a strict chronological arrangement of abstract instants. One lens by which one can look at this temporal structure is through Augustine's threefold present: a present of future things (anticipation), a present of past things (memory), and a present of present things (attention). Through the unifying action of present everyday experience, memory, attention, and anticipation are all brought together.<sup>52</sup> Yet even as the past, present, and future are brought together through the threefold intentionalities (*intentio*) of memory, attention, and anticipation all realized in the present, they are pulled apart by the distension of the soul (*distensio animi*) between the remorse and nostalgia of the past, the expectation of the future, and the fleetingness of the present.<sup>53</sup> Thus, there is both synthesis and heterogeneity, concordance and discordance, a mending together and a tearing apart in the human experience of time.

Another lens by which one can look at prefigured time is through Heidegger's notion of within-time-ness. Ricoeur reconstructs Heidegger's three-level hierarchical organization of time, which is enclosed within the structure of Care (*Sorge*), the heart of Dasein's Being.<sup>54</sup> The most "originary" and authentic in Heidegger's hierarchy of time is temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*).<sup>55</sup> From this primordial temporality are derived two

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<sup>50</sup> "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative* (ed. W. J. T. Mitchell; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 165; *TN* 1:3.

<sup>51</sup> *TN* 1:60.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> "The Human Experience of Time and Narrative," in Valdés, *A Ricoeur Reader* (see chap. 2, n. 81), 101.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger describes Dasein as the "entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its being" (*Being and Time*, 27, see chap. 2, n. 173). For an explanation of Dasein, see Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 143–48 (see chap. 2, n. 153) and Paul Gorner, *Twentieth Century German Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 60–66.

<sup>55</sup> Temporality is primordial time, from which the ordinary conception of time is

other levels, which have decreasing authenticity: historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*)<sup>56</sup> and within-time-ness (*Innerzeitigkeit*).<sup>57</sup> At the opposite pole, the one closest to the cosmological conception of time is within-time-ness, the “time as that ‘in’ which events take place.”<sup>58</sup> Within-time-ness, by virtue of its linear character,<sup>59</sup> is often mistakenly identified with the ordinary or cosmological conception of time, that of a succession of abstract “nows.”<sup>60</sup> However, Heidegger differentiates within-time-ness from the ordinary conception of time in that the former marks the time of preoccupation and is not just an abstract reference to time. Thus, to say “now” has existential connotations (“now” in relation to what one is preoccupied with) and is not just a “now” of an abstract instant.<sup>61</sup>

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derived (Ricoeur, “Narrative Time,” 166). According to Heidegger, time is commonly conceived as a “unidirectional irreversible sequence of nows one after the other.” Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (trans. ed. Albert Hofstadter; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 257. However, there is something more fundamental than the ordinary or “vulgar” conception of time presupposes and from which it springs. Heidegger (*Being and Time*, 375–76) calls this primordial time “temporality.” Temporality makes the unity and totality of Care possible. This unity, however, is not based on the dialectic of the threefold present, as in Augustine, in which the present takes the prominent place. In Heidegger, it is the future (being-ahead-of-itself) which is the key to the totality of Care, since the present is identified with Dasein’s preoccupation with things present-at-hand and ready-to-hand, and these things distract Dasein in inauthenticity (*TN* 3:64; cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 372–74). By future, what is meant is not the ordinary sense of a “‘now’ which has *not yet* become actual” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 373), but the sense of Dasein’s “coming-towards” in resolute anticipation of its ownmost possibilities, that is death. “Coming-towards” carries with it the idea of “having been” and resoluteness is placed in a situation by making it present (*TN* 3:69–70; cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 372–74). Ricoeur summarizes, “Temporality is then the articulated unity of coming-towards, having-been, and making-present” (*TN* 3:70).

<sup>56</sup> Historicity, identified with having-been, emphasizes “the stretching-along of life” between birth to death, rather than the wholeness supplied by the termination of life in death. At this level, the past displaces the future as a point of emphasis (“Human Experience of Time,” 102). This stretching-along, however, is not identical with the ordinary conception of a measurable interval between two “now” points, such as the beginning and the end; rather, as connected to Care, it represents the connectedness of life as “between” (*TN* 3:72). Historicity also includes with it the idea of repetition or recapitulation (*Wiederholung*), the coming back of Dasein to its “thrownness” into the world (to having-been) from the resoluteness toward the future (*TN* 3:74).

<sup>57</sup> *TN* 1:61–62; *TN* 3:60–85; “Human Experience of Time,” 101–102; “Narrative Time,” 166–67.

<sup>58</sup> “Narrative Time,” 166.

<sup>59</sup> “Human Experience of Time,” 102.

<sup>60</sup> *TN* 1:62. At the same time, within-time-ness draws from the natural environment for measuring time. Thus, it is often misinterpreted to represent time as an autonomous and transcendent entity (*TN* 3:85).

<sup>61</sup> *TN* 1:63.

This introduces an existential interpretation in the human experience of time that makes it capable of being narrated. Time indeed can be viewed from the perspective of the object (cosmological or physical time) in which the “nows” follow one another in abstract sequence. In human action, however, time is viewed from the perspective of the subject (phenomenological time).

*Analyzing the Prefiguration of the Narrative*

Although Ricoeur clearly shows what elements of action are being prefigured in the narrative text, he is less clear how to analyze these prefigurations. For instance, his conception of prefiguration seems to assume a commonality between authors and readers regarding how action is interpreted and given symbolic and ethical significance.<sup>62</sup> But what if authors and readers do not share the same symbolic system or universe? This is the case in reading First Testament narratives. Although these narratives present realities common to human experience, they are set in a cultural world that is far removed temporally and culturally from the contemporary reader. Thus, the reader is likely to understand certain actions differently from how the author understood them. If actions are symbolically mediated, and symbols are culturally determined, which culture are we going to take into consideration in determining the prefiguration of a narrative—the authors’ or the readers’?

*The World of the Reader*

In several essays, Ricoeur shows how the act of writing divorces the text from the original spoken event of discourse, so that the text attains a meaning that is autonomous from the mental intentions of the author.<sup>63</sup> Since the author is no longer available for questioning, the meaning of the text is now identified with the verbal meaning as it is inscribed in the text. The authorial meaning becomes “the dialectical counterpart of the verbal meaning so that they have to be construed in terms of

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<sup>62</sup> For instance, Ricoeur says, “To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this preunderstanding, common to both poets and their readers, emplotment is constructed and with it, textual and literary mimetics” (*TN* 1:64).

<sup>63</sup> *IT*, 29–30. See also “Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” (see chap. 2, n. 375), 139; “Model of the Text,” (see chap. 2, n. 117), 200–2.



each other.”<sup>64</sup> In the same way, the act of writing separates the text from the specific hearer of the spoken discourse, thus universalizing the text to an indefinite range of potential readers, and opening it up to multiple interpretations.<sup>65</sup>

Readers understand the prefigured network of actions in a text, as well as their symbolic significance and temporalities, according to their own cultural location. They evaluate the ethical significance of actions in the narrative according to their own ethical framework. Readers also make a “first guess” as to the meaning of the text as a whole, based on their preunderstandings.<sup>66</sup> Because different readers will have diverse preunderstandings and ethical expectations, the possibilities of the text can be realized in different ways, or may even remain unrealized. However, by posing a definite reader, one can set limits to these possibilities. Ricoeur himself emphasizes the importance of a real reader in the act of reading. “[T]he act of reading requires a flesh-and-blood reader, who, in actualizing the role of the reader prestructured in and through the text, transforms it.”<sup>67</sup> Just to stay with the concept of the implied reader<sup>68</sup> is not enough, for it does not bring us outside the text, which is the presupposition of *mimesis*<sub>1</sub> and *mimesis*<sub>3</sub>.

In this study, I will be acting as the real reader of the text. I will be reading it as a Filipino migrant, born and raised in the Philippines and thus immersed in Filipino values and culture, but temporarily residing in the U.S.A. for post-graduate work. However, my reading will also be informed by studies regarding the broader experience of other Filipino migrants.

### *The World of the Author*

Despite the fact that Ricoeur emphasizes the role of the reader in the interpretive process, he also gives weight to how an action is interpreted in the cultural world of the author. One can glean this from

<sup>64</sup> *IT*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> *IT*, 31–32; “Model of the Text,” 202–3.

<sup>66</sup> *IT*, 75–79.

<sup>67</sup> *TN* 3:171.

<sup>68</sup> The implied reader is the audience presupposed by the text, an imaginary person for whom the text is intended. The concept of the implied reader is embedded in the structures of the text itself, and is not derived from anything extrinsic to it. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 34, and Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 138.

his understanding of symbols, which he draws from the works of cultural anthropologists, especially Clifford Geertz. Geertz roots symbols in actual behavior and specific events occurring in particular groups of people.<sup>69</sup> In the same way, Ricoeur sees symbolism as “meaning incorporated into action and decipherable from it by other actors in the social interplay.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, symbols are socially determined and have a public character. In his earlier work, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur sets the symbols of fault in their historical-cultural context.<sup>71</sup> From the symbolic language of confession in ancient Hebrew and classical Greek cultures, he then traces the development of these symbols to the secondary and tertiary languages of myths and philosophical reflection.<sup>72</sup> Ricoeur also gives importance to the culture of the ancient Near East<sup>73</sup> and to ethnographical studies of cultures whose rites and symbols have similarities with the First Testament world because they further illumine the symbolic and ethical significance of certain actions.<sup>74</sup> However, the interpretive nature of these studies must be kept in mind and they must be used judiciously in interpreting the biblical text.

### *The Role of Explanation*

But if a written text is divorced from the author’s intention, why does Ricoeur then give importance to the author’s cultural world? A way out of this seeming inconsistency is to look at the role of explanation in Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory. Ricoeur believes that explanations

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<sup>69</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Geertz regards the understanding of culture as involving the interpretation of symbolic systems, which are based on actual behavior and specific events, rather than on an abstract relationship between isolated elements (17–18).

<sup>70</sup> *TN* 1:57–58.

<sup>71</sup> This was pointed out by Dan Stiver, email message to author, March 21, 2004.

<sup>72</sup> *SE*, 19–21; cf. 3–10.

<sup>73</sup> He says: “[I]t is impossible today to understand the Hebrew source without placing its beliefs and institutions in the framework of the culture of the ancient Middle East, for it repeats some of the fundamental themes of that culture (by direct borrowing, by reference to common sources, or in virtue of the parallelism of material and cultural conditions), and above all it modifies some others profoundly. The understanding of those likenesses and unlikenesses pertains henceforth to the proper understanding of the ancient Hebrew source of our memory, so that the culture of the ancient Middle East itself belongs marginally to our memory” (*SE*, 21).

<sup>74</sup> In *SE*, Ricoeur gives a place to ethnological studies of cultures whose documents show similar themes to those that arise in Greek and Hebrew documents. He says, “The objective likeness that ethnology discovers between them and our own past authorizes us to use knowledge about those civilizations to diagnose our own past, suppressed and buried in oblivion” (21).

have a role to play in narrative understanding in that these help the reader to follow the story better, especially when the process is blocked or interrupted. They have an ancillary and corrective function in regards to the followability of a narrative. When some details are discordant or obscured, explanations help to make the reading intelligible again.<sup>75</sup> In the prefiguration stage, understanding the realities from which the narrative derives its configurations may be blocked by a lack of knowledge of the cultural meaning of a given action. In this case, competence on the part of the reader is aided by an explanation derived from the cultural world of the text.<sup>76</sup>

For instance, Exod 4:25–26 shows the rite of circumcision, which is a familiar practice to some readers. However, it may have a different significance in the First Testament world, which is best understood by readers who belong to or have affinities with that culture. Thus, for readers not sharing the cultural world of the First Testament, the framework of this rite needs to be explained further in order to aid the readers' narrative understanding. The same is true of the symbolic meaning of other prefigured actions, and their ethical evaluation. The First Testament presupposes a symbolic world, out of which it represents action (*mimesis*). To understand the meaning of human action in the biblical narrative, we need to know something of its meaning in its own cultural world. If *mimesis* is imitation or representation of action, then it can only mean the imitation of actions that are familiar and understood in its own world.

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<sup>75</sup> "Narrative Function," 278; *TN* 1:153–55. Ricoeur specifically deals with the role of explanation in historical narratives. Ricoeur contends that even though narrative is already a form of explanation, in that "to narrate is to explain" and "to tell what happened is to tell why it happened" (*TN* 1:178, 152), there are other forms of non-narrative explanation that arise from the narrative matrix and whose function is to aid narrative understanding. Explanation also has a function in fictional narratives. Although narrative understanding is prior to the rationalizing and dechronologizing approach of narrative semiotics, or what is more broadly known as structuralism (*TN* 2:4, 29), there is a place for structural analysis as part of an explanatory attitude in the act of reading a text. See Ricoeur's essays, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding?" (see chap. 2, n. 161), 153–54; "Explanation and Understanding: Some Remarkable Connections," (see chap. 2, n. 117), 153–54.

<sup>76</sup> In his early essays, Ricoeur emphasizes structuralism as the primary critical tool for explanation in fictional narratives. However, he does not discount other critical methodologies. Structuralism is just one of the possible conceptions of interpretation (see *IT*, 82). Rational explanations and quasi-causal explanations help in furthering the understanding of historical narratives. In some of his essays, Ricoeur shows the importance of using biblical criticism. Stiver (*Theology After Ricoeur*, 62–63) believes that Ricoeur's hermeneutical model allows for the use of historical-critical methodologies.

Nevertheless, explaining the cultural context of the basic actions in a narrative should not be equated with ascertaining the author's original intention. The former merely seeks to provide an explanation that would make the actions in the narrative more intelligible by looking at the symbolic meaning of these actions in the cultural world in which they are rooted. Explanations do not govern the meaning of the narrative, nor do they attempt to show what was on the author's mind at the time when the narrative was written.

*Problems in First Testament Ethics*

A problem arises, however, when one tries to ascertain the symbolic meaning of a given action in the biblical author's cultural world, particularly in reconstructing an action's ethical significance. As Barton explains, trying to reconstruct the ethics of ancient Israel from First Testament records and other extra-biblical materials is a highly complex task. The First Testament itself, which reflects only a portion of what the Israelites believed and practiced in relation to morality, already shows a great diversity of ethical beliefs, attitudes, and actions among different Israelite groups over a period of about a thousand years. There is also the difficulty of reconstructing the ethic of a certain period since the evidence we have in the text consists of materials which come from one or a few groups, and therefore there is little basis for a more comprehensive generalization.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the Hebrew text spans many centuries, with the time of writing often several generations removed from the time in which the story took place. Thus, we are not sure whether the writing reflects the ethics of the time of writing or the time in which the events took place. For these reasons, Barton thinks that an investigation regarding what the First Testament—in its finished form and as part of Christian Scripture, and as an orthodox presentation of religion and ethics in ancient Israel—has to say about ethics is a more achievable enterprise, rather than a study of the historical development of ideas of morality and actual moral conduct (how they thought one should behave, and how they actually behaved) in ancient Israel.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, the cultural matrix is also drawn from the collection of writings, in which the specific biblical text is a part. Ricoeur shows that,

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<sup>77</sup> John Barton, "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament," in *Beginning Old Testament Study* (ed. John W. Rogerson et al.; St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1998.), 116–19.

<sup>78</sup> Barton, "Approaches to Ethics," 115–16.

with the effacement of the original historical context of discourse, the text is now “free to enter into relation with all the other texts which come to take the place of the circumstantial reality referred to by living speech.”<sup>79</sup> In the case of Exod 4:18–26, its cultural matrix is drawn from other texts in the First Testament, with which it is brought in relation by virtue of their belonging to the same collection of writings. Instead of the original context, the context of this collection functions as the new world created by all the literature belonging to the First Testament canon. Of course, it is possible to expand the collection beyond the First Testament to include other ancient Near Eastern texts. The new world referred to then would not just be the First Testament world, but the ancient Near Eastern world, as far as it is embedded in literary texts.<sup>80</sup>

The fact that the prefiguration of action is drawn from the literary context of the First Testament brings its own set of challenges and potentials. As mentioned above, the ethical significance of a given action is understood differently in various contexts of the biblical account. Thus, one cannot just take one meaning of a given action, and make it the sole basis by which one would interpret the configurations of a narrative text. Since there may be several prefigurations of a given action, several possibilities exist as to how a text can be configured.

### *A Configured Prefiguration*

One issue still needs to be addressed in regards to this way of determining the symbolic and ethical significance of a given action. This has to do with Ricoeur’s notion that a narrative text is already a configured reality. If we determine the prefiguration of an action in a certain text from other texts of the First Testament, are we not in fact drawing

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<sup>79</sup> Ricoeur, “What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” 148–49.

<sup>80</sup> If the world created by First Testament/ancient Near Eastern texts is a literary world, do non-textual materials such as archaeological relics, non-literary documents such as archives, and other material remains have a role to play in describing the prefiguration of a narrative? I believe they do, in the sense that material artifacts help the reader to envision imaginatively the actions in a narrative. This is true also for fictional narratives, since the actions in the narrative are drawn from a preexisting reality. However, this is especially important for historical narratives, which require the evidence of these material remains to weave and support its particular story. Nevertheless, material artifacts on their own cannot be the basis for determining the symbolic significance of a given action, for these artifacts need to be interpreted themselves. At best, they can only give limited support in mediating between various interpretations of a given action.

from configured texts themselves, and are we thus involved in a circular process?<sup>81</sup> This is a valid question. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that prefigured actions do already have a prior configuration. We do not have access to a “pure” reality out there that has not been configured. According to Ricoeur, human action is like a text in that its meaning is open to a limited field of possible constructions, and thus, like a text, must also be interpreted.<sup>82</sup> Our understanding of contemporary Filipino culture is already configured by texts, in that it is based on studies that already include an interpretation. Even the knowledge of the self, according to Ricoeur, involves self-interpretation,<sup>83</sup> and the self “continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself,” making “life itself a cloth woven of stories told.”<sup>84</sup> It seems, then, that to start with a configured reality is something that we have to assume in describing the prefigured actions of a narrative text.

Ricoeur himself sees the problem of circularity.<sup>85</sup> “[I]t might be objected that the first mimetic relation already bears the mark of previous narratives, in virtue of the symbolic structure of action. Is there, we asked, any experience that is not already the fruit of narrative activity?”<sup>86</sup> He considers this circularity, however, not as a problem of method, but as an expression of our human situation.<sup>87</sup> He says:

[L]ife ‘in the raw’ is beyond our reach, for the very good reason that . . . we come into the world already full of our predecessors’ narratives. . . . Action

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<sup>81</sup> Hettema notes this problem in interpreting the prefigurations of the Joseph story. He says: “[W]e have supposed that the configuration transforms and condenses the norms and morals of the prefiguration. However, how can we assert this in a situation in which we only have the configuration of *Joseph*, and have only hypothetical knowledge of the behaviour and morals of the prefiguration of this narrative? The most relevant information on Israelite morals can only be taken from other Old Testament books, which are configurations themselves. We do not have a direct access to the past. Our knowledge is mediated by signs, which ask for interpretation. We can only describe the prefiguration of *Joseph* through configurations: the text of Joseph, other texts” (*Reading for Good* [see chap. 1, n. 33], 243). Despite these reservations, Hettema proceeds to describe the assumed prefigurations of the Joseph narrative in terms of family life, court life, and divine order, without giving strong support for his prefigurations. He also does not show clearly how the Joseph narrative does in fact configure these prefigurations.

<sup>82</sup> Ricoeur, “Model of the Text: Explanation and Understanding,” 213; cf. 203–9.

<sup>83</sup> Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity” (see chap. 2, n. 169), 169.

<sup>84</sup> *TN* 3:246.

<sup>85</sup> *TN* 1:71–72.

<sup>86</sup> *TN* 3:248.

<sup>87</sup> David Carr, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricoeur, “Discussion: Ricoeur on Narrative,” in Wood, *On Paul Ricoeur* (see chap. 2, n. 87), 181.

is already symbolically mediated; literature in the largest sense of the word, including history as well as fiction, tends to reinforce a process of symbolization already at work. It could in fact be objected that I am bound to include in the notion of prefiguration the result of a previous refiguration—because effectively, for each of us, what is prefigured in our life results from prefigurations operated by all the other lives of those who taught us.<sup>88</sup>

The cycle, however, is not a vicious, but a wholesome one.<sup>89</sup> First of all, at the prefiguration stage, the narrative is only in its nascent state, “a story waiting to be told.”<sup>90</sup> Even though there is a configuration prior to prefiguration, the different components of human action receive a different configuration when brought together in a certain narrative text. Thus, the refiguration results in a progression of meaning, filling up and completing what is initially or partly inchoate.<sup>91</sup>

In the next two sections, I will look at the “configured” prefigurations of Exod 4:18–26, first from the perspective of a Filipino migrant, and then from the perspective of the First Testament writings.

#### PREFIGURATION IN THE WORLD OF THE READER

The actions in Exod 4:18–26 can be grouped around several structural networks: (1) Farewell and Leave-Taking; (2) Migration; (3) Assault on a Traveler; (4) Circumcision.

##### *Farewell and Leave-Taking*

Exod 4:18 shows the action of saying goodbye, asking for permission to leave, and being given permission to leave. The interaction is between a son-in-law who lives with his wife’s household and a father-in-law who is the patriarch of that household. The action of saying goodbye on the part of the son-in-law is linked to his intention to see whether his own relatives are still alive. Permission is granted and a blessing for safety is given by the father-in-law.

As a temporary Filipino migrant, I am familiar with goodbyes and leave-taking. The act of bidding goodbye is seen as a gesture of respect

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<sup>88</sup> Carr, Taylor, and Ricoeur, “Discussion,” 181–82.

<sup>89</sup> *TN* 3:248.

<sup>90</sup> *TN* 1:74–75.

<sup>91</sup> Carr, Taylor, and Ricoeur, “Discussion,” 182.

and courtesy in Filipino culture. Several rituals accompany the act, with the intention of preparing the individuals concerned for the eventual separation. Filipino goodbyes are prolonged affairs, often accompanied by a feast, some gift-giving, encouraging words, blessing, and kissing.

Among Filipinos, asking for permission to leave has a high ethical value,<sup>92</sup> particularly if one is living with one's parents or in-laws. A person who does not do so is branded as *walang hiya* (shameless), *walang utang na loob* (ungrateful), or *walang galang* (disrespectful).<sup>93</sup> The goodbye is directed to both the father and mother, as co-heads of the household. For married couples, spending time equally with family on both sides is deemed expected and obligatory. Hence, if a married couple is living with the husband's family, they are expected to visit and spend time with the wife's family from time to time, as long as permission is asked for and granted. Thus, I see the action of Moses in asking permission from his father-in-law in order to visit his own siblings and relatives as very commendable.

Filipinos, whether they are in the Philippines or overseas, have a strong desire to live near their kin, so it is not surprising to see relatives living in the same house (extended family structure), or within the same block. No stigma is attached to single adults living with their parents, and even to married couples living with their parents.<sup>94</sup> Filipino families

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<sup>92</sup> To inform people, especially if they belong to the same household, of plans and intentions is considered good manners. Asking leave from parents is considered one of the characteristics of "good" children. Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1974), 96.

<sup>93</sup> *Utang na loob* (lit., internal indebtedness) and *hiya* (propriety or shame) are important values that orient Filipino conduct in relating with others. There is nothing more degrading to a Filipino than to be seen as *walang hiya* ("without shame") or *walang utang na loob* ("without showing gratitude"). See Mary Racelis Hollnsteiner, "Reciprocity as a Filipino Value," in *Society, Culture, and the Filipino* (ed. Mary Racelis Hollnsteiner et al.; 3 vols.; Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila, 1975), 1:87–91; F. Landa Jocano, "Elements of Filipino Social Organization," in *Philippine Kinship and Society* (ed. Yasushi Kikuchi; Quezon City: New Day, 1989), 15–17. The Filipino kinships system attaches great importance to the difference between generations. Members of the older generation expect and demand respect (*galang*) from those belonging to the younger generation (ibid., 5). On the part of parents, they are expected to welcome even their married children to their home, but in return, married children are obligated to show respect and honor to their parents by providing for them in times of need, and seeking their wholehearted consent for their plans, especially when embarking on a journey. Mina Ramirez, *Understanding Philippine Social Realities through the Filipino Family: A Phenomenological Approach* (Manila: Asian Social Institute Communication Center, 1984), 42.

<sup>94</sup> Edwin B. Almirol, *Ethnic Identity and Social Negotiation: A Study of a Filipino Community in California* (New York: AMS Press, 1985), 170–71.



are bilocal, that is, couples live either with the bride or groom's family or within immediate proximity.<sup>95</sup> There is no specific favoring of the wife's kin or husband's kin as the place of residence. The husband's parents do not play a greater role in the marriage. Instead both sets of relatives, the husband's side as well as the wife's, continue to exercise influence.<sup>96</sup> The close connection with both families is such that those who migrate are expected to pay a visit to both sets of relatives after a few years abroad, and if the move is temporary, to consider rejoining them once they return to the Philippines. Thus, I find it appropriate for Moses to want to see relatives from his side of the family after living with his wife's family for many years. What is strange, however, is for him to initiate contact only at this stage. If he were really concerned about his family in Egypt, why did he wait so long before desiring to visit them? Why did he act only after God prodded him to go back to Egypt? And why did he want to know whether they were alive or dead? Would it not have been better for him to have visited them earlier, when the likelihood of their being alive was greater? What did he expect to happen if he were to discover that they were already dead?

In terms of temporality, saying goodbye expresses very well Augustine's *distensio animi*, when the mind that holds the present together is also distracted, extended, and stretched in opposite directions, between expectation, memory, and attention.<sup>97</sup> When I say goodbye to loved ones, I look back to the shared experiences of the past and at the same time look forward to the challenges ahead. This gives the present an element of both grief and excitement. Memory and anticipation give the act of saying goodbye (the subject of attention) a pre-narrative quality in that the act presumes a history of shared times together as well as a future where such times would no longer be possible, or again be possible in the eventuality of a return.

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<sup>95</sup> This is in contrast to being neolocal, in which the husband and wife establish a separate household away from both parents. See Belen Medina, *The Filipino Family: A Text With Selected Readings* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1991), 22–23.

<sup>96</sup> The Filipino system has a bilateral structure and relatives on both the side of the wife and that of the husband are treated equally. See Jocano, "Filipino Social Organization," 4–5. Cf. Medina, *Filipino Family*, 24.

<sup>97</sup> *TN* 1:18.

*Migration*

In these verses in Exodus, we have the picture of a whole family moving to another place through a decision by the head of the household. Exod 4:20 shows Moses taking his wife and children, and setting out on a journey to migrate back to his land of birth.<sup>98</sup>

The story of migration is a familiar one in Filipino society, whether local (rural to urban migration) or international (the Philippines to other countries). Many Filipino families have at least one relative who is working or living abroad. Current estimates are that 7.5 to 8 million Filipinos are residing overseas, comprising nearly 10 percent of the total population.

For many Filipinos, migration is a symbol of hope because it provides an alternative to being unemployed or underemployed,<sup>99</sup> living in poverty, or living a life that is qualitatively less than one's aspirations. Because of higher wages abroad and the depreciation of the Philippine peso, remittances sent by a family member working overseas can significantly help a household in the Philippines improve economically. These remittances are used for education, for building more permanent and spacious dwellings, for household expenditures, fixtures and appliances, and for medical expenses. Sometimes they are also used as capital for entrepreneurial activities<sup>100</sup> and for paying debts incurred by the family. In addition, for those migrating to more developed Western countries, there is the hope that the migrant would be able to petition the rest of the family members once he or she has become a citizen, and thus help the family move to "greener pastures."<sup>101</sup> On a national

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<sup>98</sup> According to Cassuto (*Exodus*, 53), the expression "And Moses took his wife and sons" is a phrase used to express the migration of an entire family under the leadership of the head of the family. See also Cassuto's *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, Hebrew University, 1978), 277–78.

<sup>99</sup> The unemployment rate is about 10.9 percent, while the underemployment rate is 16.9 percent (Philippine National Statistics Office, Oct 2004), <http://www.census.gov.ph/data/quickstart/>.

<sup>100</sup> Cecilia Tacoli, "Migrating 'for the Sake of the Family'? Gender, Life Course and Intra-Household Relations Among Filipino Migrants in Rome," *PhilSocRev* 44 (1996):12–32; Dean Yang, "How Remittances Help Migrant Families" (Migration Information Resource; Migration Policy Institute, 2004), <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/print.cfm?ID=270>.

<sup>101</sup> This is one of the reasons cited for the migration of Filipino nurses to the U.S.A. See Elsie D. Paras, "Migration of Filipino Nurses to the US: The Big American Dream," (International Quality Healthcare Professional Connection), <http://www.iqhpc.com/pdf/migration.pdf> (accessed Feb 24, 2005).

scale, migration is seen as necessary for national survival. The remittances of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) make up 20 percent of the country's exports and 5.2 percent of GNP, which are a lifeline to a government struggling with a large external debt. Because of the contribution to the economy by the remittances of OFWs, the export of migrant workers has become part of national policy.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the migration of overseas workers helps to relieve the high rate of unemployment, which in itself creates numerous social problems.

Migration, however, can also mean social dislocation, alienation, downward social mobility, and family fragmentation. For instance, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas describes the plight of overseas domestic Filipino workers as partial citizens. On one hand, they still see the Philippines as their only true home. On the other hand, the fear of facing the same old situation they sought to escape (mostly economic, but possibly also relational) keeps them from permanently returning to their home country.<sup>103</sup> Thus, they persist in residing in a place in which they do not have a sense of belonging and in which they will never become fully integrated. Moreover, many migrants, although experiencing an upward economic movement, have had to take low-paying and low status jobs that do not fit their actual training because these jobs are not deemed desirable by citizens of the host country. The OFWs who take these jobs are looked down upon by the host community; thus, OFWs experience a loss of social status.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, because migration holds the promise of economic advancement, some Filipinos have resorted to illegal means to be able to work and live overseas. This has given Filipinos the reputation of being law-breakers and has led to some humiliating deportations and imprisonment. Migration then, in some cases, has resulted in national shame. Lastly, the migration of one member produces the phenomenon of transnational families, in which one or two parents are abroad while children are reared by one parent or by relatives, or the adult children are abroad and live away from their parents. This arrangement brings a lot of emotional

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<sup>102</sup> Kevin O'Neil, "Labor Export as Government Policy: The Case of the Philippines" (Migration Information Source; Migration Policy Institute, 2004), <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=191>; Graziano Battistella, "Philippine Migration Policy: Dilemmas of a Crisis." *Sojourn* 14 (Apr 1999): 229–48.

<sup>103</sup> Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 37–57.

<sup>104</sup> Parreñas, *Servants*, 159–52.

stress—guilt for parents, insecurity and loneliness for children, and emotional detachment and distance between parents and children.<sup>105</sup>

On a national scale, the migration of so many nationals means massive brain drain as teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers move to other parts of the world.<sup>106</sup> This is tragic, considering that in many towns and villages in the Philippines, medical and health facilities are understaffed, while vital infrastructures are needed for the development of the local economy.<sup>107</sup>

Migration in Filipino culture is seen as a necessary pain, with some ambiguity concerning its ethical desirability. On one hand, the migration of a whole family or the temporary residence of a member of a family in a foreign country enables the family to survive economically. On the other hand, it separates a family from the kinship structure or an individual from his or her own family of orientation or family of procreation,<sup>108</sup> and results in emotional stress for the members of the family. A conflict then results between the economic security of the family and its emotional and psychological well-being. Migrating back to the Philippines is seen as good since it leads to the reuniting of family members, yet it can also be regarded as a loss of economic opportunity that can result in lack of material well-being for the family.

Like the cause of migration of many Filipino migrants, Moses' migration to Midian is due to a life-threatening situation. For Moses, it pertains to the threat to his life; for Filipino migrants, it concerns the threat to the economic survival of the family. Moses' migration to Midian, however, is not connected to any desire to alleviate his family's sufferings in Egypt. So for him to go back Egypt and be concerned about his family is good. And yet he already has another family in Midian. To go back to Egypt means leaving the security, comfort, and fellowship of his father-in-law's household and exposing his foreign wife and children

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<sup>105</sup> Parreñas, *Servants*, 82–88.

<sup>106</sup> In 2003, 25,000 nurses left the country, which is three times more than those who graduated that year. Because nurses leave for the U.S.A. or Canada as soon as their training is over, hospitals are left without quality medical care. See "Filipinos Take 'Going Places' Literally," *Washington Post* (May 26, 2004), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A55580-2004May25?language=printer>.

<sup>107</sup> E. San Juan, Jr., "The Predicament of Filipinos in the United States: Where are you from? When are you going back?" in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* (ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan; Boston: South End, 1994), 207.

<sup>108</sup> The family of procreation consists of the individual with wife and children. Both are regarded as a nuclear family in Filipino culture. See Medina, *Filipino Family*, 14.

to the dangers and hardships of a land which is not their own. There is a conflict then between his family of orientation and his family of procreation. For Filipinos, both families are important, so from their perspective, Moses' decision to go back is a difficult choice.

The temporality of migration has a transitional dimension; one is "betwixt and between." One is pulled back to the land that one has left—the familiar surroundings, the relationships, the routines of daily life, the comfortable niche—and pulled forward by the land to which one is going, with its promise of opportunities and growth. As Peter Phan puts it, the migrants' time involves both memory and imagination; "it is contemplating the past and creating the future at the same time" under the pressure of the present.<sup>109</sup> Again, we see Augustine's concept of *intentio* and *distentio* in operation. Even as the migrant's present experience holds the past and the future together, the person is also torn apart by the longing for the life that once was, the expectation that things would get better in the future, and the struggles and opportunities of present existence. An inchoate narrativity is already present in this experience of the discordant concordance of time.

### *Attack on a Traveler*

In Exod 4:24–26, a traveler is in a resting-place when he is attacked unexpectedly and his life is threatened. No motive or cause is given for the attack. An action is undertaken to counter the death threat, and the attack ceases.

Filipino culture values hospitality and welcome to visitors and travelers. This is especially true among Filipino migrants because they need the protection and hospitality of friends in a foreign land. An attack while traveling is considered morally reprehensible and, in today's language, can be considered a "terrorist" act. When a Filipino truck driver in Iraq was kidnapped while traveling in a convoy from Kuwait to Baghdad in 2004, many Filipinos became aggrieved and indignant. Angelo Reyes, the truck driver, became the symbol of the average overseas Filipino worker, and many sympathized with his plight because they either are or have been overseas workers, or have family members working in the Middle East.

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<sup>109</sup> Peter Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective* (ed. Peter Phan and Jung Young Lee; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 114.

Oriented by this perspective, I see Yahweh's attack on a vulnerable Moses traveling back to see his family as not only puzzling and shocking; it is also ethically unacceptable and a cause for indignation. Moses just wanted to see his family. Why would Yahweh want to kill him?

An incident, such as a threat to one's life, family, and hopes for the future, can wipe out in a moment all thoughts of the past and the future. The thing "present-at-hand" becomes the dominant reality and orients one's sense of time. Here we see Heidegger's notion of within-time-ness operating, in which time is measured not by clock time but by what preoccupies the subject. When life is threatened, the time of survival becomes the time of preoccupation. Time stops as one copes with the threat. When the threat is overcome, however, the experience becomes a defining moment, so that past and future events are interpreted in light of this significant event.

### *Circumcision*

Although most Filipinos find it necessary to have a male child circumcised, they are not always conscious about the reasons for doing so. When asked for the reason for the practice, the reply is often: "Because it is the custom." Nevertheless, older generations of Filipinos sometimes give comments, which attribute a certain state of affairs to the lack of circumcision, like, "he is uncircumcised, so he did not grow to full maturity" or "he is uncircumcised, that's why he could not produce a child." Such comments indicate, in an oblique way, that in the thinking of some Filipinos, circumcision is linked to male fertility and maturity.<sup>110</sup> This link is supported by the fact that if the parents fail to have the child circumcised shortly after birth, they should make sure he is circumcised at the onset of puberty. Others, however, believe that circumcision is necessary for cleanliness and health because the foreskin, if it is not removed, becomes a receptacle for bacteria. Perhaps, behind this thinking are notions related to cleanness/uncleanness or purity/impurity, with circumcision being seen as an act of purification. There are those who also practice circumcision for religious reasons, seeing it as part of the practice of being a Christian.

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<sup>110</sup> According to the observation of a U.S.A. military staff, Filipinos believe that circumcision facilitates sexual intercourse. In Charles Barney, "Circumcision and Flagellation Among the Filipinos," *Journal of the Association of Military Surgeons of the U.S.* 13 (1903), 159, as cited by E. M. Loeb, *The Blood Sacrifice Complex* (Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association 30; American Anthropological Association, 1923; repr. New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1964), 17.

Despite the existence of these various and vague beliefs about circumcision, there are no other ceremonies accompanying the act. It is commonly performed by a medical doctor when the child is still an infant, often upon the initiative of the mother. Although linked to male puberty, maturity, and fertility, it is not a socially marked initiation rite, unlike infant baptism, which is celebrated by a big feast, with the presence of *ninongs* and *ninangs* (godparents), and the participation of the community. Thus, it does not have the temporality of a defining event in the life of the individual or an epoch-making event in the life of the community.

Therefore, although Zipporah's action in circumcising her son is a familiar act to me, its significance totally escapes me. Why it had the effect of averting the attack is even more of a puzzle. For this, as well as other actions in the text, an explanation from the world of the First Testament becomes necessary in order for one to follow the story meaningfully.

#### PREFIGURATION IN THE WORLD OF THE FIRST TESTAMENT

##### *Farewell and Leave-Taking*

Saying goodbye to one's family or in-laws, when moving to another place, is an action that can be seen in other texts of the First Testament. In the world of the First Testament, saying goodbye to family involves not only stating one's intentions to leave, but also asking permission from the head of the household. The primary family unit is the father's house (בֵּית אָב), which consists of the male head, his wife or wives, the married sons, the sons' wives and offspring, unmarried sons and daughters, the servants, and the servant's families.<sup>111</sup> Since the ancient Israelite family structure is patrilocal,<sup>112</sup> it is the woman who joins her husband's household. However, there are cases in the First Testament when men join their wives' household, perhaps because the husband is

<sup>111</sup> For the structure of the בֵּית אָב, see Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (ed. Ken Campbell; Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 38; Raphael Patai, *Family, Love and the Bible* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1960), 15; Christopher J. H. Wright, "Family," in *ABD* 2: 762; Lawrence Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985): 18–23; Carol Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel* (ed. Leo G. Perdue et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 19.

<sup>112</sup> Patai, *Family and Love*, 17–18; Meyers, "Family," 34.

a fugitive from his own land (Jacob, Moses), or has an official capacity in the royal household (David).<sup>113</sup> The man, however, does not cease to be a member of his father's house<sup>114</sup> and may rejoin it at some point.<sup>115</sup> On this occasion, the man says goodbye to the patriarch of the wife's household, and begins the journey to return to his own father's house, taking his wife and children with him.

It is expected that a man living in his wife's household should first ask permission from the male head of the household before leaving. Thus, Jacob was upbraided by Laban for not asking permission, when Jacob left secretly, together with his wives and children, to return to his own land (Gen 31:17–18, 26–30). In Laban's eyes, what Jacob did was improper because it was done only by those who consider the women as spoils in battle (Gen 31:26). David was also expected to ask permission to leave, if not from his father-in-law Saul, then from his brother-in-law Jonathan (1 Sam 20:27–29). In both instances and in Exod 4:18, visiting one's siblings and desiring to go back to the household of one's father is seen as a legitimate reason for leaving (Gen 31:30a; 1 Sam 20:28–29).

### *Migration*

Migration is also common in the First Testament world. "The crossing of boundaries is part and parcel of the founding narratives found in the Hebrew Scriptures."<sup>116</sup> The family of Terah migrates from Mesopotamia to Haran, and this sets the stage for Abraham's migration to Canaan. Families migrate in order to have adequate provision in times of drought and famine. In such cases, migration is seen as a temporary measure, especially if it involves leaving the fellowship and support of one's kin. Jacob's family migrates to Egypt because of a drought in the land, and with the knowledge that there is ample provision in Egypt

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<sup>113</sup> Joseph was another case, but it was Pharaoh who took the role of the patriarch. Joseph joined Pharaoh's household, and Pharaoh as the royal patriarch gave Asenath the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be Joseph's wife (Gen 41:45).

<sup>114</sup> Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture I–II* (repr.; London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 52.

<sup>115</sup> The exception is Joseph who did not return to his own land to rejoin his father's household. However, Jacob's household migrated to Egypt, and thus Joseph became part of his father's household again.

<sup>116</sup> Robert Schreiter, "Theology's Contribution to (Im)migration," in *Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization* (eds. Gioacchino Campese and Pietro Ciallella. New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2003), 170.



and an influential kin there in the person of Joseph (Gen 46–47). After many years, Jacob's family, which has grown to be a powerful people, flees Egypt to migrate back to Canaan. Elimelech and his family migrate to Moab because of a famine in Judah (Ruth 1:1–2), but Naomi his wife, together with her daughter-in-law Ruth, migrate back to Israel after the death of their husbands.

Individuals may migrate to flee the threat of death, as in the case of Jacob and Moses. Joseph, on the other hand, was forced into slavery in another land because of the actions of his own brothers. Another example of forced migration is Daniel, who, along with other deportees to Babylon, had to learn a foreign language and foreign ways, eat strange food, be given a different name, be forced to adopt a new religion, and be constantly at risk from new policies that could endanger his life.<sup>117</sup> In such cases, the migration is seen more as an exile, a condition that is not the person's own choice. The person may settle, acquire a wife and a livelihood, but still remain a stranger in the foreign land. Both Jacob and Moses migrate back to their land of birth after a period of time, but this time, they are no longer on their own, since the wives and children whom they have acquired during their sojourn accompany them. In the First Testament, the people of Israel may migrate from Canaan for some time, but this is always countered by an equally strong or even stronger movement to return to Canaan. Symbolically, living away from Canaan is associated with being away from God and the good that God provides, while living in Canaan, despite its perils, is regarded as the epitome of the good life.

There are mixed signals how migration is viewed ethically in the First Testament, although this phenomenon occurs frequently in First Testament literature. On one hand, the migration of Jacob's family to Egypt in time of famine is instrumental to their survival; on the other hand, it opens the way by which they become victims of ethnic differentiation and oppression. The journey of Elimelech to Moab when there is a famine in Judah can be seen as part of economic necessity; yet it is also in this foreign land that Naomi loses her husband and two sons. Nevertheless, she gains a faithful daughter-in-law in Ruth, who, as a migrant in Israel, becomes a source of blessing for Naomi and an ancestress of the Davidic monarchy. Ruth describes herself a נכריה (stranger), rather than a גר (resident alien) (Ruth 2:10), emphasizing

<sup>117</sup> Schreiter, "(Im)migration," 174.

her oddness and perhaps indicating why people might not readily trust her.<sup>118</sup> But she proves trustworthy to her mother-in-law, and through her, Naomi receives hope in the birth of a child that would continue her husband's lineage.

The journey of Abraham to Canaan is not explained in Genesis in terms of economic necessity (it can even be considered a move toward economic insecurity due to the lack of permanent territory), but it is seen in positive terms because it is in response to God's command. Through Abraham's migration, new possibilities and a new people came into being.<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, the forced migration of the Israelites during the exile is seen in negative terms, since it is a result of Israel's sin, although it has its positive effects as a purifying experience for the people.

Moses' return migration to Egypt can also be evaluated in both positive and negative terms. Because it leads to reuniting with his family and becomes instrumental to Israel moving from Egypt to Canaan, it can be considered good. But Egypt is not Canaan; it is the place of slavery and degradation for Israelites. Moses is returning to a situation in which the Israelites are not in a good place. Life in Egypt is still remote from the good life that God intended for Israel.

### *Attack on a Traveler*

The First Testament world presents travelers as being vulnerable to attacks. Travelers are aware that harm might befall them on the journey (Gen 28:20–21; Gen 42:38; Ezra 8:21–22; Exod 18:8). Hence, prayers for protection are solicited (Ezra 8:21–23), and God's protection, guidance and help are gratefully received (Ps 107:4–9; Gen 35:2–3). Presumably because of the dangers of travel, God promises protection for Israel and for pilgrims on their journey (Exod 23:20; Ps 121). Because of the vulnerability that travelers face, a high value is given to hospitality,<sup>120</sup> since travelers can so easily be molested without a host to protect them.<sup>121</sup> The high value given to hospitality and the condemna-

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<sup>118</sup> Dianne Bergant, "Ruth: The Migrant Who Saved the People," in *Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization* (eds. Gioacchino Campese and Pietro Ciallella; New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2003), 52.

<sup>119</sup> Schreiter, "(Im)migration," 171.

<sup>120</sup> See Gen 18:1–6; 19:1–9; 24:15–33; Exod 2:15–22; 1 Kgs 17:8–16.

<sup>121</sup> Gen 19:1–9 and Judg 19 show what can befall those who spend the night in the open square of a city.

tion of harmful acts toward travelers can be inferred from some of the instructions in Deuteronomy. The Moabites and the Amalekites are to be barred from joining the assembly of the Lord because they did not offer hospitality to the Israelites (Deut 23:3–6), while the Amalekites are to be blotted out from remembrance because they attacked the Israelites on their journey, while the Israelites were faint and weary (Deut 25:17–19).

Although there is no specific law that deals with a prohibition to attack a traveler, there are laws that prohibit killing by treachery (Exod 21:14), or deliberately lying in wait to ambush an unsuspecting victim (Num 35:20–21; Deut 19:11–12). Part of the general breakdown of society, as the prophets see it, is the existence of marauding bands who rob travelers (Hos 6:9), or people who plot an ambush with deceit and violence (Jer 9:8 [7]; Mic 7:2; Hos 7:6).

One can infer from the high value given to protecting a traveler and from the prohibition and negative evaluation of those who lie in wait to kill that attacking a vulnerable traveler is something that is ethically unacceptable in the First Testament world.

### *Circumcision*

As a literal act, circumcision refers to the complete removal of the foreskin from a man's penis (female circumcision is not recorded in the First Testament), or to the foreskin's partial removal in order to uncover the glands. This act, however, is loaded with a significance that goes beyond the cutting off of a piece of the male sexual organ, for in many cultures circumcision fulfills a social and religious function.

The most extensive account of circumcision and its meaning for Israel is found in Gen 17, so this is usually the starting point for any discussion on this topic. Here, the rite is inextricably linked with God's covenant with Abraham. To explain, however, that "circumcision is the sign of God's covenant with Israel" does not exhaust nor make apparent the meaning of the rite. In fact, it leads to more questions, as Michael Fox spells out, "[H]ow is it a sign of the covenant? For whom is it a sign—God, Israel, or foreign peoples? What is the function of this sign? What does it signify, and what does it accomplish?"<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the passage assumes that circumcision is a well-known practice

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in Light of the Priestly *ʾot* Etiologies," *RB* 81(1974): 558.

even before it was considered the sign of the covenant, and thus must have had a recognized meaning for the participants even before the covenant was instituted.<sup>123</sup>

As a symbolic rite,<sup>124</sup> circumcision takes on a multivalent meaning.<sup>125</sup> Rites rarely mean only one thing, so the uncovering of layers of meaning attached to the rite of circumcision is not surprising. Nevertheless, although anthropologists emphasize the multivocal character of rites, biblical scholars still persist in ferreting out a single authoritative meaning for a certain rite, and go on to assume that the ancient Israelites interpreted the rite in this way.<sup>126</sup> This observation holds true as well in identifying the meaning of circumcision. One over-all meaning is identified and all passages dealing with circumcision are interpreted in this light. Moreover, the meaning of the rite is often divorced from the literal act of cutting the foreskin, from which the symbol derives its meaning.

Ricoeur's theory of symbol provides some insights regarding how the rite of circumcision can be interpreted.<sup>127</sup> A symbol has a surplus of signification and its meaning is inexhaustible. It cannot be fully put into language. Its meaning is tied to the primary, literal signification and is only accessible through the latter; so even though there is a linguistic element to a symbol, this verbal explanation remains bound to the element from which it springs. Ricoeur further shows that metaphors, by their purely linguistic nature, can help clarify certain aspects of symbols, since the non-semantic element of symbols results in a diffusion of meaning. It is for this reason that I begin to elucidate the surplus of meaning in the rite of circumcision in the First Testament by first looking at the metaphorical use of circumcision, and its counterpoint, uncircumcision. Most studies begin with the non-metaphorical texts before turning to the metaphorical texts, interpreting them with the meaning gleaned out of non-metaphorical texts. Ricoeur's theory,

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<sup>123</sup> Circumcision was practiced by many peoples of different cultures even before the existence of the Hebrews or the Semites. See Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966): 473–76; J. P. Hyatt, "Circumcision," *IDB* 1: 629; G. Mayer, "מִלּוּ", in *TDOT* 8:159–60.

<sup>124</sup> Although not all symbols are rites, the basic units of rites are symbols. Rites are symbols that are acted out through gestures and postures of the body. Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (rev. ed.; Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 67.

<sup>125</sup> John Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," *JSOT* 88 (2000): 7.

<sup>126</sup> William K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>127</sup> See pp. 12–15.

however, implies that beginning with metaphorical texts may lead to a better grasp of the meaning of circumcision, since metaphor captures in language what is indistinct and muted in symbol.

*Circumcision as a Metaphor*

In some verses in Leviticus (19:23–25; 26:40–42), Exodus (6:12, 30), Deuteronomy (10:16; 30:6), Jeremiah (4:4; 6:10; 9:24–25), and Ezekiel (44:6–9), the language of circumcision and uncircumcision is applied to other parts of the body (heart, lips, ears), aside from the male sexual organ.

The most common metaphor is that of the “circumcision of the heart.” In several instances, this metaphor, along with other subordinate metaphors, are clustered around the root metaphor of a “return” (שוב) to Yahweh.<sup>128</sup> Jeremiah 4:4, for instance, belongs with 4:3–4 in the immediate context of 4:1–4, which has for its theme (along with 3:22–25) the call for Israel to return to Yahweh, after a period of faithlessness.<sup>129</sup> Deut 30:6 is set in the context of God’s promise of restoration once Israel returns to the Lord after exile and misfortune (30:1–10).<sup>130</sup> Although the verb שׁוּב does not appear in Lev 26:40–42, these verses, together with the immediate context of 26:40–45, function in the same way as Deut 30:1–10.<sup>131</sup> Here, the literal act of moving in the opposite direction from which one is headed, in order to arrive again at the initial departure,<sup>132</sup> is used to express Israel’s renewed relationship with Yahweh. In these passages, “circumcision of the heart” is one aspect of or is part of the process by which this renewed relationship can come about.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>128</sup> For the usages of שׁוּב, see William Holladay, *The Root Šûbh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1958). Although Holladay gives an extensive treatment of the root, he does not particularly discuss how the verb functions metaphorically.

<sup>129</sup> Klaus Grünwaldt, *Exil und Identität: Beschneidung, Passa, und Sabbat in der Priesterschrift* (Frankfurt am Main: Hain, 1992), 13. The broader unit is 2:1–4:4, which also has “returning/repenting” as its theme. See Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 324–31. The word שׁוּב is used thirteen times in this section.

<sup>130</sup> See Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* (NIBCOT; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 289–90, and Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 266–67.

<sup>131</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 322.

<sup>132</sup> Holladay, *Šûbh*, 53.

<sup>133</sup> Grünwaldt thinks that “circumcision of the heart” can be equated with turning to Yahweh (*Exil und Identität*, 17). However, this view collapses the secondary metaphor into the root metaphor. It also does not take into account the primary, literal sense as the key to understanding the secondary, metaphorical sense.

A metaphor, according to Ricoeur, exists because of an unusual predication. The metaphorical twist, however, lies not only in the word “heart” (לב or לבב) or in the word “circumcise” (מול), but in the whole sentence which poses a predicative relationship between the two words. The heart is seen literally as “the central and crucially vital organ” and it is this centrality that is taken up when the word is used to express the center of a person’s feelings, wishes, reasoning, and decision-making.<sup>134</sup> But how does one circumcise the heart? When one superimposes the idea of a circumcised penis with a circumcised heart, one comes up with absurdity. The incompatibility between the literal idea and the metaphorical one forces one to find a kinship between the two ideas, and this produces semantic innovation. Thus, both involve the cutting off or severance of something that impairs the organ so that it cannot function in a certain way. When the sheath that keeps the organ from responding is removed, it is enabled to function, as it should. To “circumcise the heart” then indicates the removal of something that clouds people’s minds, emotions, and wills, which prevents them from responding to God in an appropriate way.

One way of clarifying what “circumcision of the heart” means is to see it in relation to other metaphors grouped together around the dominant metaphor of a “return to Yahweh.” In Deut 10:16, the command to “circumcise the foreskin of your heart” (ומלתם את ערלת לבבכם) is put in inverse parallel to “do not stiffen your neck any longer” (וערפכם לא תקשו עוד). In the latter, the literal image of a rigid, unyielding neck is akin to a proud, inflexible, stubborn person who refuses to surrender or give way. A circumcised heart then is associated with the “loosening of the neck,” that is, a pliant and yielding attitude toward Yahweh. To “circumcise the heart” is to remove the “hardness” that keeps a person’s emotions, desires, mind, and will from fully surrendering to Yahweh. It is to make the heart “the organ of commitment” more sensitive and responsive to God.<sup>135</sup> This notion of humbling oneself as part of the process of circumcising the heart is also reflected in Lev 26:41b: “Then their uncircumcised heart will be humbled (אוֹיְאֵז יִכְנַע לִבָּבָם הָעֶרְלִי) and then they shall pay off their iniquity.”

<sup>134</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 40–58.

<sup>135</sup> Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 130.

In Jer 4:4, the command to the people of Judah and Jerusalem “to circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskin of your hearts” is preceded by another metaphorical command to “break up your fallow ground” (4:3a). Fallow ground is land that has not been planted for some years, and thus has hardened and has become overrun with thorns; hence, the admonition “do not sow among thorns” (4:3b). Seeds sown in such ground could not prosper because the soil is hard and cannot nurture the seeds; even if the seeds do take root, they would not yield a good harvest.<sup>136</sup> The land must first be broken or tilled, that is, softened and opened up by the plow, and its thorns removed. By being faithless, the people have let the ground of their lives become fallow. Before the planting of new seeds of faithfulness, they must prepare themselves by “softening their hearts” and removing anything that can hinder growth from taking place. It is in this context that the command to “remove the foreskin of the heart” is given. The association of the metaphors of “breaking” and of “removing the foreskin” shows that a measure of violence is necessary before the people can live once again “in truth, justice, and righteousness” (4:2). It implies that returning to Yahweh involves a negative element—the removal or breaking of something—and a positive element—the taking on of qualities that God desires.

The negative and the positive are accentuated in Deut 30:6, but here, the action of “circumcising the heart” is not commanded, but promised by God.

ומל יהוה אלהיך את־לבבך ואת־לבב זרעך לאהבה את־יהוה אלהיך בכל־לבבך ובכך נפשך למען חייך

The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

The negative act of circumcising the heart results in the positive element of Israel being enabled fully to love God. The impediment must be removed first before there can be a full restoration of the covenant relationship.

<sup>136</sup> William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 129; Peter C. Craigie et al., *Jeremiah 1–25* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991), 67.

Two other references to an “uncircumcised heart” connect it with one’s spiritual state, either distinguishing it from the physical state of being circumcised, or identifying it with the spiritual state to express one’s piety. Jer 9:24–25 describes Israel and other nations as circumcised in the foreskin, but uncircumcised in heart. An exterior circumcision is not enough to escape God’s punishment; one must also be circumcised internally. In Ezek 44:6–9, those who are “uncircumcised in heart and flesh” are the foreigners who, by virtue of not possessing the external and inner mark, are regarded as impure, and thus are barred from entering God’s sanctuary. Here, being physically uncircumcised is identified with being ritually and morally impure,<sup>137</sup> so that physical circumcision serves to remove the uncleanness (cf. Isa 52:1).<sup>138</sup>

To sum up then, the metaphor “circumcision of the heart” points to some possible symbolical meanings attached to physical circumcision. Physically, to circumcise is to remove or cut off the part of the organ that impairs or hinders it from functioning in the way that it should. It is to uncover the sheath and expose the organ so that it becomes more sensitive and responsive to touch. Symbolically, to circumcise is to remove anything that hinders the person from being sensitive and responsive to the divine will. It is to prepare the person to attain fully his or her function, as God intended it to be.

The understanding of being uncircumcised as “being functionally deficient” so as not to be able to accomplish what is supposed to be done works well with other metaphorical uses of “uncircumcised,” as it refers to other parts of the body. In Exod 6:12, 30, Moses describes himself as being “uncircumcised of lips” (עַרְלֵ שִׁפְתַּי), when expressing his fear that Pharaoh and the Israelites would not listen to his message. A mouth is for communicating, and to be uncircumcised of lips indicates a deficiency in the proper functioning of this part of the body. The same case can be made for the meaning of “uncircumcised ears” (עַרְלֵה אָזְנוֹ) in Jer 6:10. Ears are made for hearing; thus, those who cannot listen are not able to realize the full functioning of their ears, so that they become insensitive to sounds from outside.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25–48* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 454. This understanding of uncircumcised as being unclean is also reflected in Isa 52:1.

<sup>138</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (OTL; 2 vols.; trans. John Baker; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:138–39.

<sup>139</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 438.



Eilberg-Schwarz sums it up: “[The] Israelite writers equated the lack of circumcision with the improper functioning of a human organ. Uncircumcised hearts, ears, and lips are organs that cannot do what God intended them to do.”<sup>140</sup>

One other metaphorical use of “uncircumcised” refers not to parts of the body, but to fruit trees. An interesting text in which ערל is used is Lev 19:23–25, which concerns the regulation regarding fruit trees. It reads:

When you enter the land and plant any tree for food, you shall regard its foreskin—its fruit—as uncircumcised (ערלתם ערלתו את-פריה). For three years, it shall be as uncircumcised (ערלים) to you; it must not be eaten. In the fourth year, all its fruit shall be for a holy feasting to the Lord. But in the fifth year, you may eat its fruit, in order to increase its yield for you. I am the Lord your God (Lev 19:23–25).

Many English translations substitute “forbidden” for “uncircumcised” in these verses,<sup>141</sup> understanding “uncircumcised” to mean that the fruit is not available for the community’s use, in the same way that an uncircumcised person is unconsecrated, and thus, not yet a part of the community. This substitution, however, weakens the force of the metaphor. The meaning “forbidden” is taken from an inferred symbolic meaning of the term, and thus the metaphor’s meaning does not arise from its tension with the literal meaning. The shock is lessened and no new meaning emerges.<sup>142</sup>

The idea of an “uncircumcised tree” is ludicrous, so one is forced to find a resemblance between the literal male organ whose foreskin is still intact and an uncircumcised tree. At first glance, it seems that the resemblance between an uncircumcised fruit tree and an uncircumcised penis is that both have not been cut. Thus, an uncircumcised tree is one from which fruit has not been harvested. This is a first level similarity. However, the text itself gives the analogue—the fruit tree is uncircumcised in that it is not to be eaten. The function of a fruit tree is to provide fruit for eating. By implication, an uncircumcised tree is one whose function to produce fruit for eating has not yet fully been realized, in the same way that an uncircumcised male organ has

<sup>140</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 149.

<sup>141</sup> See NRSV, NJPS, NIV, NASB.

<sup>142</sup> Moreover, Eilberg-Schwartz (*Savage*, 150) points out that the word “uncircumcised” is never applied to other things that are forbidden to the community.

not attained its full or proper function. Eilberg-Schwartz explains that since the fruit tree has just been planted, its fruit is not yet ready for eating. He says that, generally, juvenile fruit trees bear little or no fruit in the first three years. Thus, a juvenile tree is still infertile, while a circumcised or mature tree yields a full harvest.<sup>143</sup> An objection can be made, however, to Eilberg-Schwartz's description of an uncircumcised tree as infertile. For if the tree is infertile, why is there a prohibition to eat its fruit? Rather than regarding an uncircumcised fruit tree as infertile, it fits better to see it as immature, imperfect, and still deficient in fulfilling its function in providing food.

From the metaphor of the uncircumcised fruit tree, the meaning of uncircumcision as not fully or properly functional is reinforced. At the same time, there is the idea that to be uncircumcised is to be unavailable for intended purposes. The metaphor also suggests a connection between circumcision and fertility, a link that is made more explicit in passages in which circumcision is regarded as a symbol.

#### *Circumcision as a Symbol*

Circumcision as symbolic action or rite is found in Gen 17:9–14, 23–27; Gen 21:4; Exod 12:44, 48; and Lev 12:3, all of which are considered part of the Priestly writings; outside the Priestly account, it is found in Gen 34; Exod 4:24–26; and Josh 5:2–9.

The account in Gen 34 does not show any religious motivation for the rite. Rather, it is presented as a custom of the clan of Jacob, and a requirement for assimilation into their clan. The rite is linked to the wedding rite and is given as a precondition for intermarriage.<sup>144</sup> To intermarry with one who is uncircumcised (**אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-לֹא עָרְלָה**) (34:14) is considered a disgrace (**חֲרָפָה**). The word **חֲרָפָה** is used in relation to what other peoples or nations might think. To be considered a disgrace is to be looked down upon, shamed, and ridiculed by others.<sup>145</sup> It is clear that Israel looked down on those who were uncircumcised, as can be seen from all the derogatory comments about the “uncircumcised Philistines” (Judg 14:3, 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6, 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20). Grünwaldt thinks that these comments reflect Israel's conscious-

<sup>143</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 150.

<sup>144</sup> Grünwaldt, *Exil und Identität*, 7; William Propp, “The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 360.

<sup>145</sup> See usage in 1 Sam 11:2, 17:26; Ps 31:12, 44:14, 79:4, 89:42, 109:25, 119:22; Jer 15:15, 51:51.

ness of religious differences with other nations.<sup>146</sup> However, Gen 34:14 shows that some of Israel's neighbors shared their disdain for the uncircumcised. Thus, it is more likely that the term reflects a cultural superiority shared by those who practice circumcision. There is also a probability that those who adopted the practice were in the dominant group; hence, circumcision was seen as a sign of status.<sup>147</sup>

Instead of a bride price in terms of property, animals, or servants, Jacob's sons insist that the only bride price acceptable to them is the circumcision of all the men in Hamor's city. The narrative mentions that Jacob's sons gave the precondition deceitfully. The deceit, however, did not lie in their presenting circumcision as an acceptable bride price by which the two peoples might live together. The deceit lay in their intention to kill the Hivites while they were in their helpless state. "Although the institution of circumcision here is used as a device by which to immobilize the males, there can be no doubt that the stipulation reflects normative practice among the tribes of Israel."<sup>148</sup>

Here we see circumcision as a mark of cultural distinction and people who adopt the practice have a superior ethnic consciousness although this ethnicity is defined in broad terms.<sup>149</sup> The rite of circumcision is a symbol of identity and status. It is also regarded as an initiation rite into marriage and into the communal life of a tribe.<sup>150</sup>

The connection of circumcision with marriage is not limited to this passage. The link is also found in Exod 4:18–26, the subject of our study. Furthermore, it is alluded to in the story of David's marriage to Saul's daughter, Michal, in which Saul demands as a bride price the foreskins of a hundred Philistines (1 Sam 18:20–27).<sup>151</sup> It is interesting that the Hebrew words for bridegroom, son-in-law, and father-in-law all share the same root *חָתַן*, which in Arabic means, "to circumcise."<sup>152</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Grünwaldt, *Exil und Identität*, 10.

<sup>147</sup> Propp, "Infant Circumcision," 360. See also n. 19 on the same page.

<sup>148</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 236.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Mayer, *TDOT* 8:161: "Circumcision was a self-evident sign of ethnic identity."

<sup>150</sup> Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapter 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 363.

<sup>151</sup> Propp, "Infant Circumcision," 360–61.

<sup>152</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:47; Kutsch, "*חָתַן*," *TDOT* 5:272. It is possible that the meaning "to circumcise" is a later development, based on marriage customs. See Propp, "Infant Circumcision," 358, n. 9.

The account in Genesis 17, as Nahum Sarna shows, is divided into four parts, which is artistically arranged as follows:<sup>153</sup>

- |                                                                                                             |                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Verses 1–8<br>Abram is to be the progenitor<br>of numerous nations and of kings.<br>His name is changed. | (3) Verses 15–22<br>Sarai is to be the progenitrix<br>of numerous nations and kings.<br>Her name is changed. |
| (2) Verses 9–14<br>The law of circumcision is set<br>forth.                                                 | (4) Verses 23–27<br>The law of circumcision is<br>carried out.                                               |

A noticeable feature of this structure is that the sections on circumcision (vv. 9–14; 23–27) are preceded by the promise of progeny and numerous descendants, as well as a change of names, first in relation to Abram and then to Sarah. The change in name indicates a break from the past, an introduction to a new phase in life, and a transformation of destiny, status, identity, and relationship.<sup>154</sup> For Abram and Sarai, this new phase involves the fulfillment of God's promise, characterized by fertility instead of barrenness, of having numerous descendants instead of none. It also involves a change of status (although this is still to take place in the future)—from being insignificant nomads to being the father and mother of nations and kings; from being sojourners to possessors of the land (17:6, 8, 16). Moreover, it marks the establishment of a new relationship with the deity: "I will be their God" (17:8), inviting Abraham's descendants to lay claim to this relationship with all its rights and responsibilities. The act of circumcision then is linked to the functions of procreation, continuity of lineage, a change in status, a new way of relating, and the beginning of a new phase in life.

It is in relation to these functions that the phrase "sign of the covenant" (אות ברית) needs to be understood. Drawing from Michael Fox's work,<sup>155</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz underscores the close connection between the symbol and its referent, so that circumcision, as a symbol, "has properties that make it appropriate for the content which it signifies."<sup>156</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 122.

<sup>154</sup> In the ancient Near East, the inauguration of a new era is often marked by an assumption of a new name by the king. The change in name marks a new phase of life, separating it from the past. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (CC; trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 261. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 124, 360, n. 3, citing Gen 41:45; Num 13:16; 2 Kgs 23:34; 24:17.

<sup>155</sup> Fox, "Sign of the Covenant," 557–96.

<sup>156</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 146.

The covenant between God and Abraham involves God's promise of fertility and numerous descendants to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:2–6). Circumcision then is an appropriate symbol for God's promise since "the male organ is viewed as the primary vehicle by which reproduction and intergenerational continuity are ensured."<sup>157</sup> Circumcision symbolizes the full and proper functioning of the male organ, mainly for procreation, but in an extended sense, also for disciplined sexual activity.<sup>158</sup> Moreover, the scarification of the male sexual organ serves to emphasize that the blessing of fertility comes from God, and that it is a result of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants.<sup>159</sup> Circumcision, then, is not a sign for Abraham's descendants to remember their covenant obligations (there were hardly any stipulations given, except the performance of the sign itself),<sup>160</sup> but a sign to them that God will remember the promise given to Abraham.

Fox points out that circumcision is not a sign that shows that one belongs to the covenanted people. First of all, it is not a visible sign, and secondly, Israel's neighbors also practiced circumcision.<sup>161</sup> Moreover, Ishmael, who is not part of the covenant (17:19–21), is also circumcised. Fox sees the rite as a reminder to God to fulfill the promise of progeny, rather than a reminder to people.<sup>162</sup> However, this does not preclude it from being also a sign to Abraham and his descendants, to assure them of the fulfillment of God's promise. By performing the rite, Abraham's descendants are thereby indicating their participation in and acceptance of the original promise to Abraham.<sup>163</sup> In this sense they

<sup>157</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 148. Cf. Lawrence Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 38–39.

<sup>158</sup> John Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel* (see chap. 1, n. 1), 201–2. For a fuller treatment, see Goldingay, "Circumcision," 7–9.

<sup>159</sup> Benjamin Scolnic, "From Bloody Bridegroom to Covenant Rite: *Brit Milah*—The Perspective of Modern Biblical Scholarship," *ConJuda* 42, 4 (Summer 1990): 13. Scolnic points out that a part of the body is emphasized or drawn attention to by scarring or tattooing it.

<sup>160</sup> The duty cannot be the rite of circumcision, for how can doing the act remind one to do the act? As Fox ("Sign of the Covenant," 595) puts it: "[C]ircumcision cannot be a reminder of itself."

<sup>161</sup> Cf. Propp, "Infant Circumcision," 357; Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 470.

<sup>162</sup> Fox, "Sign of the Covenant," 595–96.

<sup>163</sup> Circumcision is not presented as a legal obligation, but "as an act of appropriation, of witness to the revelation of God's salvation, and the sign of its acceptance" according to Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 201. So with Eichrodt, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:57: "Human

“keep” (שמר) the covenant—that is, maintain and preserve—it (17:10). Hence, those who do not perform the rite are “cut off” (כרת)<sup>164</sup> from God’s people, for they have broken (הפר) God’s covenant (17:14). Their lack of participation in the rite indicates a denial of God’s promise and a refusal to share with the rest of the community its destiny as God’s people and as recipients of God’s promise. By their action of excluding themselves from the community, they also exclude themselves from being beneficiaries of God’s covenant blessings.<sup>165</sup>

The link between circumcision and fertility is present in many cultures that practice circumcision. Eilberg-Schwartz cites numerous ethnographical studies of African cultures that show an explicit connection between circumcision and a man’s readiness to take on the responsibilities of marriage, chief of which are sexual activity, procreation, and the perpetuation of the family’s lineage.<sup>166</sup> What is peculiar, though, about the circumcision of Abraham’s descendants is that they are to be circumcised on the eighth day. Circumcision, as a puberty rite or as an initiation rite, is usually performed when the male reaches adulthood or just before he gets married. In Israel, however, infant circumcision is the norm. Scolnic suggests that the reason why circumcision is performed on infants is to show that “Israelite fertility is not based on sex but on God’s promise.”<sup>167</sup> The rite is still connected with fertility, but progeny is no longer seen as the result of a personal or community undertaking; rather, it is regarded as the outworking of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants. This concern for fertility points to the importance given to the continuity of the family. This is consistent with the unbroken genealogies evident in the Priestly writings, which reveal a concern for the continuous succession of generations.<sup>168</sup>

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performance, therefore, acts more as a means by which man obtains the use of, or enters into the enjoyment of the gift granted to him.”

<sup>164</sup> What the formula “he shall be cut off” entails is not very clear. Sarna (*Genesis*, 126) thinks that this is a penalty left to divine execution, which may involve premature death or sterility. Propp (“Infant circumcision,” 356, n. 7) believes that the punishment of כרת primarily involves lack of descendants. Eilberg-Schwartz agrees, drawing from the opinion of medieval Jewish commentators (*Savage*, 148, 251, n. 10). Rad (*Genesis*, 201), however, thinks that it means excommunication from the sacred community.

<sup>165</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 126.

<sup>166</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 144–46.

<sup>167</sup> Scolnic, “*Brit Milah*,” 14.

<sup>168</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 16.

Yet even as it expresses continuity, circumcision also symbolizes a break from the past and an entry into a new phase of life. The circumcision of Abraham and his descendants introduces a break in the genealogy, which distinguishes Abraham from his forebears and presents him as a founder of a new lineage.<sup>169</sup> The action of cutting suggests this break: there is separation from the past and the start of something new. This new thing includes change in identity—as expressed in the change of names—and taking on a new status.

The symbol of circumcision as a new beginning is reiterated in Josh 5:2–9. This text is part of a longer section (1:1–5:15) which deals with Israel's transition from wandering in the wilderness into a settled life in Canaan.<sup>170</sup> In this section, Israel undertakes several rites of passage—the crossing of the Jordan, the setting up of memorial stones, the celebration of the Passover—which would effect their transformation into a landed nation.<sup>171</sup> Circumcision is one of the rites that would help facilitate Israel's transition into a new phase of life.<sup>172</sup> This rite expresses both continuity and change. On one hand, circumcision connects this new generation with the promises to the patriarchs. On the other hand, it introduces a new era, in which these promises (particularly the promise of land) are concretized and brought into realization. This is seen in the way the account of the rites of circumcision and Passover (5:2–9) are framed by the foreshadowing of military victory<sup>173</sup> that would enable Israel to claim the land.

Moreover, an explicit contrast is made between “the warriors who came out of Egypt who did not listen to the voice of the Lord” (5:6), and “all the people who were born in the wilderness” (5:5), which now comprise the new generation. The in-between status of the previous generation is emphasized: both settled (Egypt) and wandering (wilderness), both slave (Egypt) and free (wilderness).<sup>174</sup> The ambiguous

<sup>169</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 167–69.

<sup>170</sup> R. D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 74–77.

<sup>171</sup> L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2000), 78.

<sup>172</sup> Goldingay (“Circumcision,” 13) observes how with Abraham, Moses, and Joshua's generation, circumcision is performed when God is about to fulfill a creative purpose.

<sup>173</sup> Josh 5:1 reports how the surrounding nations dreaded the coming of the Israelites, while 5:13–15 shows Joshua's encounter with the commander of the Lord's armies. Both incidents underscore the certainty of victory. See Hawk, *Joshua*, 75.

<sup>174</sup> Hawk, *Joshua*, 79.

transitional state is accentuated by the repeated use of בדרך “on the way” (5:4, 5, 7).

The end of this ambiguous state is marked by the circumcision of the new generation. Perhaps it is in relation to the ending of the liminal state that the phrase the “disgrace of Egypt” (חרפת מצרים) can be understood.<sup>175</sup> Even though the Israelites are no longer slaves in Egypt, they have been wandering in the wilderness, without a settled existence. They have been freed, yes, but they still do not have the dignity of being a landed nation. Their uncircumcised state underscores this liminality; their purpose for leaving Egypt is still left unfulfilled. The rite of circumcision brings to a closure this period in the life of Israel as a nation. Hence, the disgrace has been rolled away. A further indication that the transitional state has ended is that the provision of manna ceases and the people start to eat the produce of the land.

Joshua 5 brings together the rite of circumcision with the rite of Passover in connection with Israel’s transition into a landed existence. In Exodus 12, both rites are also brought together, but this time in connection with Israel’s departure from Egypt. In both passages, Israel is at a critical juncture of its existence, transitioning from one stage to another:

<sup>175</sup> Commentators are not sure of the precise meaning of this phrase. See Hawk, *Joshua*, 81; Alberto J. Soggin, *Joshua: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 72; Robert Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), 190. By virtue of the time reference (היום), which marks the mass circumcision that happened just that day, God’s utterance, “Today, I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt,” seems to mean that God has removed the shame connected with Israel’s uncircumcised state. This would link the verse with Gen 34:14 in which the same word, חרפה, is used to describe the disgrace of intermarrying with the uncircumcised. However, if the disgrace is connected to the uncircumcised state of the current generation, why is it referred to as the “disgrace of Egypt”? The phrase seems to refer to the uncircumcised state of the generation who left Egypt, rather than of the current generation. Sasson (“Circumcision,” 474) argues that the circumcision in Egypt was incomplete since Egyptian circumcision involved only a dorsal incision upon the foreskin, uncovering the glans penis. Hebrew circumcision, on the other hand, involved cutting the prepuce and exposing the corona of the penis. To improve on Egyptian circumcision, it was necessary to circumcise the Israelites “a second time” (5:2). The “disgrace of Egypt” then would refer to the Israelites’ inferior state of circumcision when they came out of Egypt. However, Josh 5:5 explicitly states that the people who came out of Egypt were circumcised, while the ones who were born on the way were not. Thus, most would interpret the “disgrace of Egypt” as referring to the degrading conditions of slavery, in which the Israelites suffered the scorn of the Egyptians. See John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 73; Boling, *Joshua*, 190; Trent Butler, *Joshua* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1983), 59). It is unclear, however, how the act of circumcision removes the shame connected with slavery in Egypt. Perhaps, the reason is that circumcision marks a change of status and identity.



first, from Egypt to the wilderness, then from the wilderness to Canaan.<sup>176</sup> Using Arnold Van Gennep's tripartite structure of a rite of passage,<sup>177</sup> Robert Cohn shows that Israel passes through three distinct phases in its journey from Egypt to Canaan. The first is separation—the exodus from Egypt—which is marked by a final break at the crossing of the Red Sea. Second is the liminal phase, the period of wandering in the wilderness. The last stage is reincorporation, which occurs at the crossing of the Jordan, the conquest, and the settlement.<sup>178</sup> In the transition from one phase to another, the observance of the rites of circumcision and Passover is emphasized, which highlights the importance given to them in facilitating the transition process in a period of change.

Although these rites became a regular part of the life of Israel, they did not lose their character as rites of transition. By celebrating the Passover, the Israelites remember God's judgment on Egypt and their deliverance, which enabled them to leave their bondage in Egypt and settle into their own land. By performing the rite of circumcision, the Israelites appropriate for themselves the promises that God gave to Abraham, which effected the transition of Abraham's descendants from a wandering tribe into a great nation. By celebrating these rites, the Israelites are reminded of their past as wanderers and slaves, and of God's gift of a settled and dignified existence.

Commentators see the link between the Passover rite and the circumcision rite in both being apotropaic rites, that is, they are intended to ward off evil.<sup>179</sup> Underlying this view is the belief in the power of blood to protect one from evil spirits. Thus, it is thought that just as

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<sup>176</sup> Dianne Bergant sees the Passover as a rite of passage. According to her, "rites of passage are the socially organized dramatic processes whereby people are moved not only from one status to another (e.g., girls become women, boys become men, etc.), but also from one geographic plane to another (e.g., an exodus from a place or an arrival in a new land)." See "An Anthropological Approach to Biblical Interpretation: The Passover Supper in Exodus 12:1–20 as a Case Study," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 53.

<sup>177</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 36.

<sup>178</sup> Robert Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies* (AAR Studies in Religion 23; Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1981), 7–23. Others who share this view are Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 35–36; Susan Ackerman, "Why is Miriam also among the Prophets (and Is Zipporah Among the Priests?)" *JBL* 121 (2002): 66–71; and Paula M. McNutt, "The Kenites, the Midianites, and the Rechabites as Marginal Mediators in Ancient Israelite Tradition," in *Semeia* 67 (1994): 124–25. In contrast to Cohn, however, they consider the whole absence of Israel from Canaan (which includes the time in Egypt) as part of the liminal phase.

<sup>179</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 453; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 110, 117, n. 1, citing rabbinic literature; R. G. Hall, "Circumcision," *ABD* 1:1026.

the blood of a lamb applied to the doorposts and the lintel spared the ones who were inside the house, the blood of circumcision also protected one from harm.<sup>180</sup> This connection, however, is nowhere made in Exodus 12. No mention is made of the “blood of circumcision.” The ordinances of the Passover (Exod 12:43–49), which include circumcision as a requirement for participating in the rite (12:44, 48), are not part of the original instructions given by God to Moses (12:1–20), or by Moses to the elders of Israel (12:21–27) in the first Passover in Egypt. These ordinances are placed after the account of Israel’s departure from Egypt (12:37–41), and are presented as applying to subsequent celebrations of the Passover by later generations.<sup>181</sup> The thrust of these ordinances is to delineate the qualifications for future participants of the feast,<sup>182</sup> the chief of which is circumcision. Circumcision then functions as a mark of inclusion and exclusion, identifying those who have ritually participated in appropriating the promises to Abraham, and therefore have the right to take part in the ritual that remembers the outworking of God’s commitment to those promises. At the same time, it excludes those who are not or have not made themselves heirs to the promises as expressed in their lack of observance of the rite.<sup>183</sup> Participation in the rite indicates acceptance of what is encoded in the rite.<sup>184</sup> Thus, those

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<sup>180</sup> The apotropaic theory is based on parallels with practices in modern Syria, in which the blood of a sheep (*fedu*) is smeared on the threshold and lintel of a house to protect the inhabitants inside from sicknesses, misfortune, and the Jinn. J. Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), 361–64, citing Samuel Ives Curtiss, *Primitive Semitic Religion Today* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1902), 196–97. Gray (364–65) thinks that, in the Passover rite, a vestige survives of a popular belief by ancient Hebrews that spirits, demons, plagues, and sicknesses can be repelled through blood manipulation. According to him, this folk belief persisted in the Passover rite, but it was transformed and subsumed under the supremacy of Yahweh. Hence, in the rite, the evils that the blood kept away were under the control of Yahweh. However, blood as a means of keeping away evil spirits is not supported in the First Testament. Some have contended that Exod 4:18–26 supports this belief, but I will discuss in chap. 4 why I do not see it this way. See pp. 202–203.

<sup>181</sup> This section (Exod 12:43–49) follows the comment that just as Yahweh kept vigil that night when Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt, Israel in response is also to keep vigil for Yahweh on that night throughout their generations (Exod 12:42).

<sup>182</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 202.

<sup>183</sup> The deliverance of Israel from Egypt is presented as the outcome of God remembering the covenant established between God and the patriarchs (Exod 2:24; cf. Exod 3:6–7, 16–17; 6:2–8).

<sup>184</sup> Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 119. He says: [B]y performing a liturgical order the participants accept, and indicate to themselves that they accept whatever is encoded in the canon of that order.” Rappaport (120–21) differentiates acceptance from belief.

who undergo circumcision indicate their acceptance of God's promises to the patriarchs, and therefore can lay claim to God's deliverance, which is the natural consequence of those promises. The act also shows acceptance of God's power to open the womb, and thus acknowledges, as well, God's right to take away or spare the fruit of the womb.

Thus, aside from being rites of passage, the rites of circumcision and Passover are linked by the fact that they are both rites that distinguish Israel as a people who are the recipients of God's promise.<sup>185</sup> The blood of the lamb on the doorposts distinguishes the one to be saved (the firstborn of Israel) from those devoted to destruction (the firstborn of Egypt).<sup>186</sup> The circumcised male organ distinguishes the heirs of God's promise from those who are not the objects of that promise. These are signs, but not signs to the outside world; they are signs to God primarily, to bring to mind the covenant made with Abraham, and to Israel secondarily, to remind them that they are the people of God's special favor.

Circumcision did not involve the individual alone, but the whole household.<sup>187</sup> It was performed in the home, before being transferred to the synagogue at a much later period.<sup>188</sup> Although the mark was on the male organ, it was a sign that embraced both Abraham and Sarah, for the promise was given to both.<sup>189</sup> It involved not only the offspring of Abraham but also the slave members of the household, whether born in the house or bought from foreigners. By being bought with

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Belief is an inward state, while acceptance is a public act. It shows an acceptance of the public order which may or may not reflect the belief of the performer. However, he stresses, "although liturgical performance does not eliminate insincerity, it renders it publicly impotent. It is the visible, explicit, public act of acceptance, and not the invisible, ambiguous, private sentiment, which is socially and morally binding" (122).

<sup>185</sup> This is consistent with the recurring theme in the plague narratives, in which God makes a distinction between Israel and Egypt, so that Israel is spared from the plagues with which God struck Egypt (Exod 8:22–23; 9:4; 10:22–23).

<sup>186</sup> The preposition ל in **וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאֵת עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם שָׁם לָכֶם** "The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are in" (12:13) is to be construed as expressing interest or advantage. Hence, **לָכֶם** "for you" means "for your benefit or protection." Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 152, n. 13.

<sup>187</sup> Schneeman, "Die Deutung der Beschneidung," 22.

<sup>188</sup> Hyatt, "Circumcision," *IDB* 1:630.

<sup>189</sup> Since the household is seen as a unit, and the man is regarded as the representative of the household unit, the sign of God's promise is made only on the male organ. The sign, however, embraces the whole family, including the woman. It is the whole family whom God will bless, so that the individual members of the household, whether men or women, slaves or masters, parents or children, receive the blessing by being part of the household.

money, the slave was considered to belong to the master, and through this, became part of the family.<sup>190</sup> It was the whole household then that observed the rite of circumcision and not just the individual. Thus, circumcision, along with the Passover rite, underscores the centrality of the family. God's promises and acts of deliverance were appropriated by the whole household, the **בית אב**, which included not only the biological descendants, but also the slaves and the aliens who had made a choice to become part of Israel by participating in the rituals that express its being a people under Yahweh.

In summary, circumcision is a symbolic rite that expresses several layers of meaning. The basic meaning is found in the metaphorical use, which indicates the full and proper functioning of the sexual organ through the removal of or cutting off the part that hinders the organ from realizing its intended purpose. In the symbolic usage, this purpose is linked to the functions of fertility and family continuity. Circumcision is also associated with times of transition, when change of identity and status takes place, or in the movement from one state of existence to another. It facilitates entry into a liminal state, or out of it. For Israel, circumcision signifies the means of expressing the appropriation of God's promises to Abraham through a ritual act. As such, it also becomes a mark of distinction—of inclusion and exclusion—identifying those who belong to the community that pledges through a ritual act to accept God's promises. This multi-layered understanding of circumcision as metaphor and symbol will inform our reading of Zipporah's action in circumcising her son (Exod 4:25), as we deal with the configuration of the text in chap. 4.

#### SPEECH ACTS AS PREFIGURED ACTIONS

The focus on prefigured action must not neglect the importance of speech as broadly representing action, the force of which is prefigured in the world of the author and the world of the reader. A characteristic of biblical narrative is that actions are often carried out through speeches. In Exod 4:18, for example, the action of asking for permission is carried out through Moses' speech, while the action of granting permission is fulfilled through Jethro's speech. Divine speeches are particularly

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<sup>190</sup> Grünwaldt, *Exil und Identität*, 98.

important in biblical narratives, since they serve not only to interpret events, but also act as a precondition for these events. Thus, they are “essential to the progress of the story.”<sup>191</sup>

In every culture, there are words that commit the speaker to a certain state of affairs, move the hearer to a certain state of affairs, or bring about a state of affairs. Modern day philosophers have given the name “speech acts” to these utterances because they involve the speaker or the hearer of the utterance in some form of action. Although not specifically mentioned by Ricoeur in his discussion of prefiguration, the preunderstanding of action can be greatly supplemented by studies in speech act theory.

In the following sections, I give a short explanation of speech act theory and the ethical implications of different speech acts. The specific performative force of these speech acts, as well as their ethical significances, are prefigured in the world of the author and the world of the reader because they are tied to pre-existing conventions.<sup>192</sup> These prefigurations are brought over in the interpretation of a narrative, particularly in the identification (often intuitively) of the specific performative force and ethical significance of the different speeches given by the characters in the story. I will argue in chap. 4 that the meaning of Zipporah’s statement *חתן דמים אתה לי* (Exod 4:25) and its ethical significance can be understood better if its performative force within the narrative is identified.

### *Speech Act Theory*

A speech act is called such because the utterance of the speaker becomes the vehicle or conveyor of action. In other words, speaking “counts as doing.”<sup>193</sup> J. L. Austin calls this type of action “performative utterance,” or simply “performative.”<sup>194</sup> Austin initially differentiated “performatives” from “constatives,” in that a constative utterance simply makes a descriptive statement, without necessarily performing an action by that

<sup>191</sup> Barr, *Biblical Theology* (see chap. 2, n. 478), 351.

<sup>192</sup> Dan Stiver, email communication.

<sup>193</sup> James Adams, “Speech Act Theory, Biblical Interpretation, and Isaiah 40–55: Exploring the Use and Value of the Philosophical Notions of Speech Act Theory for Biblical Interpretation, Specifically for Isaiah 40–55” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2004), 117.

<sup>194</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

statement. Later, however, Austin points out that the distinction between constatives and performatives are not as clear-cut as they seem,<sup>195</sup> in that descriptive utterances (e.g., “I state that . . .”) perform an act similar to so-called performative utterances (e.g., “I warn you that . . .”). J. R. Searle develops this further, stating that every linguistic communication is a speech act: “speaking a language is performing speech acts.”<sup>196</sup> “[E]very utterance has a particular performative force.”<sup>197</sup> In light of this, all the speeches in biblical narratives can be considered speech acts or performatives.

According to Austin, there are three elements involved in a speech act: (1) the locutionary or propositional act, which is equivalent to the sense and reference of what is spoken, and traditionally is taken to be the meaning of the discourse; (2) the illocutionary act, which shows the (conventional) force of what is spoken, such as informing, ordering, warning, promising, etc.; and the (3) the perlocutionary act, which is what is brought about or achieved in the hearer as a result of what is spoken, such as convincing, persuading, misleading, etc.<sup>198</sup> Ricoeur shows what happens to these three acts when oral discourse passes into writing. The locutionary act is inscribed in the sentence as proposition, and this can be identified repeatedly through its predicative structure. The illocutionary act, however, is more difficult to identify than the locutionary act because of the absence of gestures, voice tone, and other overt signs that would indicate the force of what is being said. Nevertheless, syntactical features can serve as indicators of the illocutionary force of a sentence. Of the three, the perlocutionary act, being the least discursive, is also the least inscribable, and therefore the hardest to identify in a written work. Ricoeur believes that the meaning of any act of discourse is the correlate of these three acts, as far as they are codified in the written work, and can be identified and reidentified as having the same meaning.<sup>199</sup>

<sup>195</sup> See J. L. Austin, “Performative-Constative,” in *The Philosophy of Language* (ed. J. R. Searle; London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13–22.

<sup>196</sup> J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 16.

<sup>197</sup> Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 45.

<sup>198</sup> Austin, *How to Do*, 109. Searle (*Speech Acts*, 24–25) does not agree with Austin’s notion of locutionary acts. Instead of three elements, Searle gives four: (1) utterance acts; (2) propositional acts; (3) illocutionary acts; (4) perlocutionary acts. For a brief discussion, see Richard Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation: Toward a Hermeneutic of Self-Involvement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 46–47.

<sup>199</sup> Ricoeur, “Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” 135.

Since illocutionary acts are more identifiable in a written work than perlocutionary acts and have clear ethical dimensions, they will be the focus of my analysis of the speeches in Exod 4:18–26. Although the focus of speech act theory has been on English sentences and verbs, the idea of illocutionary force is also present in other languages. Generally, most languages have grammatical signs that commit the speaker to a present or future state of affairs, move the hearer to a state of affairs, express the speaker's psychological state concerning a state of affairs, or bring about a state of affairs. For instance, biblical Hebrew has formal markers that indicate whether a verb is in the volitional moods (imperative, jussive, cohortative). It has verbs that commit the speaker to a certain state of affairs, like verbs for promising or taking an oath. The same is true of Philippine languages, where verb conjugation, usage, and context act as pointers to the illocutionary force of what is spoken.<sup>200</sup> Thus, a general understanding of illocutionary acts is already prefigured in both the world of the reader and that of the author, although the specific illocutionary force of a certain speech can be ascertained only within the context of the narrative configuration.

Although all utterances can be considered speech acts, the strength of their illocution would vary. Richard Briggs proposes “that illocutionary force operates across a spectrum of strengths.”<sup>201</sup> All utterances are indeed speech acts, but this is employing a weak use of the term. There is a performative force that depends on the non-linguistic context of the utterance, so that the force would differ when the words are uttered in a different context. There is another kind of performative force that depends primarily on the words of the utterance itself, so that the same

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<sup>200</sup> The identification of illocutionary force, however, is not just dependent on the kind of verbs used, for it is possible that the same illocutionary force could be conveyed even with the absence of a verb that normally conveys such force. When God says, “I will be with you,” no verb for promise is present; nevertheless, the utterance still has the illocutionary force of a promise. Moreover, the same verb may communicate different illocutionary forces, depending on the context in which it is used. As Searle says, “differences in illocutionary verbs are a good guide but by no means a sure guide to differences in illocutionary acts” (John Searle, *Expression and Meaning* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979], 2; cf. Evans, *Self-Involvement*, 45). “[V]ocabulary and grammar are not in themselves reliable criteria to identify speech acts,” according to Anthony Thiselton, “Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological Hermeneutics,” in *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (ed. Roger Lundin et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 229. Thus, grammatical markers may signal a possible direction, but it is still the total context that must be taken into account in determining the illocutionary force of an utterance.

<sup>201</sup> Briggs, *Words in Action*, 150.

force would be present even if the words were uttered in different contexts.<sup>202</sup> Utterances whose illocution is dependent on a non-linguistic convention (the original meaning of a performative by Austin), can be said to have strong illocution, while those whose convention lies on the linguistic meaning only has weak illocution.<sup>203</sup>

John Searle classifies illocutionary acts according to the: (1) illocutionary point, (2) the direction of fit between word and world, and (3) the psychological state or sincerity conditions of the speaker.<sup>204</sup> The following shows his classification:

(1) *Assertives*. These commit the speaker to the truth of what is expressed. Words function to match the world in the sense that “the *state of affairs* to be reported *determines the word* that is spoken.”<sup>205</sup>

(2) *Directives*. Utterances in which the speaker asks the hearer to do something. In contrast to assertives, the world or state of affairs is made to fit the words spoken. Depending on the one doing the speaking, directives may have authoritative force on the hearer. Examples are

<sup>202</sup> Evans, *Self-Involvement*, 45–46.

<sup>203</sup> Briggs, *Words in Action*, 63–65. For example, the words “Guilty” would have a different force if uttered out of the context of a judicial court. Instead of a verdict of guilt, it can be construed as an accusation or an admission of wrong. This utterance is considered to have a strong illocutionary force. An example of a weak illocutionary force is one given by Warnock: “I warn you not to come.” What makes the warning a warning is not the non-linguistic convention or context, but the meaning of the sentence itself. G. J. Warnock, “Some Types of Performative Utterance,” in *Essays on J. L. Austin* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 76, as cited by Briggs, *Words in Action*, 64.

<sup>204</sup> The classification used here is based on John Searle, “A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts,” in *Expression and Meaning*, 1–29. Searle differentiates between illocutionary point and illocutionary force. The illocutionary point is the purpose of the act, while illocutionary force would pertain to the degree in which the purpose of the act is to be achieved. For example, requests and commands have the same illocutionary point, in that they try to get the hearer to do something. But they have a different illocutionary force in that commands are stronger in getting the hearer to do something than simple requests (2–3). The direction of fit shows whether the words fit the world (as in statements), or the world is made to fit the words (as in commands and promises), or goes in both directions (as in declarations). Psychological state refers to the attitude the speaker has toward the propositional content of the utterance (e.g., belief, desire, pleasure, intention, etc.), if he or she were sincerely performing an act with that force; hence, the term sincerity conditions. The sincerity conditions remain the same even if the speaker’s real attitude is the opposite. For a good tabulated summary of Searle’s classifications, see Briggs, *Words in Action*, 51. Austin has another set of classifications (*How to Do*, 151–63), but it is Searle’s classification which is more widely used. See also John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 36–46; 51–59.

<sup>205</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 298.



command, request, plea, instruction, commission, invitation, warning, permission, and exhortation.

(3) *Commissives*. These commit the speaker to some future course of action. As in directives, the direction of fit is from word to world, but this time the vehicle of action is the speaker, not the hearer. Examples are promises, intentions, oaths, and pledges.

(4) *Expressives*. Express a psychological state about a presupposed state of affairs. No direction of fit is expressed. Examples are apologies, thanks, condolence, congratulations, and welcome.

(5) *Declaratives*. A state of affairs is brought about by the act of uttering itself, because an extralinguistic institution is presupposed that makes a certain utterance bring about a change in the world. The direction of fit is both ways since “their point is to get the world to fit the propositional content just by saying that the propositional content fits the world.”<sup>206</sup> Examples are: “You’re fired”; “I resign”; and “I baptize you.” Under declaratives are utterances that have the marks of assertives, in that they are subject to the validation of being true or false, but they function as declaratives nonetheless. Examples are: “You’re guilty” (spoken by a jury), or “You’re out” (by an umpire). Statements like these can be disputed later, but they take effect anyway once uttered by someone with the institutional backing to authorize them.

A caution about this classification is that the categories are not intended to be taken as tight and fast rules since an utterance can belong to more than one category.<sup>207</sup> Their usefulness is “operational and pragmatic in relation to given arguments and purposes.”<sup>208</sup> Moreover, an utterance, although formally belonging to one category, may actually be indirectly performing another illocutionary act.<sup>209</sup>

Although Exod 4:18–26 can be regarded as a whole to be a speech act of the narrator to the reader, my focus will not be on the illocutionary act of the narrative as a whole, but on the illocutionary force of the

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<sup>206</sup> Daniel Vanderveken, “A Complete Formulation of a Simple Logic of Elementary Illocutionary Acts,” in *Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives* (ed. Savas L Tsohatzidis; London: Routledge, 1994), 105.

<sup>207</sup> Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 28–29; Evans, *Self-Involvement*, 39.

<sup>208</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 296.

<sup>209</sup> See Searle, “Indirect Speech Acts,” in *Expression and Meaning*, 30–57. Searle explains: “In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer” (31–32).

speeches of the characters in the narrative world.<sup>210</sup> First, there are the speeches of the human characters: Moses and Jethro (4:18), and then Zipporah (4:25). The bulk of the speeches in this passage, however, consists of divine speeches (4:19 and 4:21–23). Since the speeches of the characters are part of the narrative world, the analysis of their illocutionary force will be integrated in the configurative stage, since it is within the context of the story that their force can be understood. In chap. 4, I will identify the illocutionary point and force of the different speeches in Exod 4:18–26, and integrate these with how the text is configured.

However, since the pre-existing conventions underlying the specific illocutionary point and force of an utterance are a function of culture and language, their discussion properly belongs to the prefiguration stage and not to the configuration stage.

### *The Ethical Implications of Illocutionary Acts*

Certain illocutionary acts are tied to ethical obligations on the part of the speaker or hearer, depending on the type of illocutionary act, the institutional status of both speaker and hearer and their relationship to each other, and the context in which the utterance is uttered. One way to explore these ethical commitments is through the concept of self-involvement. According to Donald Evans, certain utterances commit the speaker to a future action or behavior, imply a certain attitude or intention on the speaker's part, or express his or her feelings or attitude. Evans calls these utterances self-involving language because they entail "practical commitments, attitudes, and feelings."<sup>211</sup> He particularly explores the self-involving elements in commissives and behabitives (expressives),<sup>212</sup> because commissives entail commitment to future patterns of behavior while expressives entail attitudes and mental

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<sup>210</sup> Briggs (*Words in Action*, 20) distinguishes two levels in which the language of the biblical text in terms of self-involvement may be studied. The first level is that of the narrative world, in which the language of the biblical characters become the focus. The second level is that of the interaction between the author and reader. The focus of this study is on the first level, that of the narrative world.

<sup>211</sup> Evans, *Self-Involvement*, 11.

<sup>212</sup> Evans follows Austin's terminology of behabitives. Austin calls behabitives utterances that express reactions or feelings toward the addressee because of what she or he has done (*How to Do*, 34). Searle, in his classification, calls these expressives. To avoid confusion, I will use the term expressives instead of behabitives, and assertives instead of constatives, even though these are not the terms used by Evans.

states in addition to belief.<sup>213</sup> They also presuppose a value judgment.<sup>214</sup> Evans argues that certain constatives (assertives in Searle's language) are also self-involving in that they express a commissive or expressive force and involve evaluative language. These statements take "a stance in the public domain that commits me to certain forms of (positive and negative) behaviour."<sup>215</sup> On the other hand, assertives like "God is my King" entail an acknowledgement of a status or role, which is tied to expected rights and responsibilities.<sup>216</sup> Thus, certain utterances, by nature of their illocutionary force, have ethical significance in that these utterances take a stance concerning a state of affairs and contain implications for one's lifestyle, attitudes, and behavior.<sup>217</sup>

The ethical dimension is most evident in commissives and directives. Commissives, such as oaths and promises, obligate the speaker to fulfill the commitment or intention he or she has announced. Directives, on the other hand, obligate the hearer to follow what the speaker has asked, depending on the authoritative and institutional status of the one doing the speaking. The strength of obligation is dependent on the degree of force in the speech act. For example, commands have a stronger obligatory force than requests; oaths and promises are stronger than intentions. But even requests can be obligatory if the speaker is in a position of authority over the hearer. As Evans argues, expressives and some assertives also indicate a value judgment. The psychological state presupposed in an expressive, such as "I apologize," presupposes an awareness of wrong. Certain declarations functioning as an assertive may also express an evaluation ("Not guilty"). These illocutionary acts attain ethical significance depending on the status and the intention of the speaker, and the institutional and extra-linguistic conventions that determine the rights and obligations tied to a certain illocutionary act.

Thiselton speaks of the transforming power of biblical texts in relation to illocutionary acts. Drawing from John Searle's explanation of direction of fit between world and words as a way of classifying

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<sup>213</sup> Evans, *Self-Involvement*, 45, 57.

<sup>214</sup> Evans, *Self-Involvement*, 58.

<sup>215</sup> Briggs, *Words in Action*, 151. Similar to his position on a spectrum of illocutionary forces, Briggs also thinks that self-involvement operates on a spectrum of strengths that range from strong to weak (*Words*, 150).

<sup>216</sup> Evans, *Self-Involvement*, 67. Evans differentiates these from "flat constatives" which do not have such entailment.

<sup>217</sup> Adams, "Speech Act Theory," 143.

illocutionary acts, Thiselton shows how texts can shape both world and word. Whereas the direction of fit in promises and commands is from world-to-word, thus shaping a state of affairs, in assertions the direction of fit is from word-to-world, thus shaping the word according to a state of affairs.<sup>218</sup> These “leave neither the speaker nor the hearer uninvolved and unchanged.”<sup>219</sup> A divine directive seeks change in the hearers’ state of affairs, as they modify their attitudes, conduct, worldview, and lifestyle according to the word that was spoken. Divine promise, on the other hand, “bridges the gap between what ‘is’ and what ‘ought to be.’”<sup>220</sup> And implicit in divine assertions (“I have loved you with an everlasting love”) as well as human confessions about God (“God is Creator”) is a commissive element. Thiselton gives Matt 28:19–20 as a prime example, since it contains speech that gives a command, provides authorization, and shows the self-commitment of a promise. All of these have ethical dimensions since “a commission *assigns* a task and a role; an authorization *confers* a status; a pledge or a promise *invites* trust, and also action which takes the promise for its basis.”<sup>221</sup>

However, it is on the illocutionary act of promise that Thiselton focuses most of his attention. “Acts of promise bring to light most clearly the commitments and responsibilities of agents of promise within an intersubjective, public, extralinguistic world of ethical undertaking and address.”<sup>222</sup> Promise implies serious responsibilities on the part of the speaker, presupposes serious institutional states of affairs that support the word uttered, and has transformative effects.<sup>223</sup> “[S]poken acts of commitment . . . bring about changes in situations or patterns of expectation and behaviour which would not otherwise take place.”<sup>224</sup>

In Exod 4:18–26, there are directives (God commands Moses; Moses requests for permission to return to Egypt), commissives (God expresses an intention about the future state of affairs; Moses expresses his desire to see his kin; Jethro grants permission for Moses to go), and assertive-declaratives (God declares that Israel is God’s firstborn; and perhaps,

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<sup>218</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 298.

<sup>219</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 300.

<sup>220</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 300.

<sup>221</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 287.

<sup>222</sup> Thiselton, “Communicative Action,” 234.

<sup>223</sup> Thiselton, “Communicative Action,” 237.

<sup>224</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 305.

Zipporah's speech can also be classified in this way). Because they entail certain obligations on the part of the characters in the story, all have implications for the ethical reading of the narrative.

*Ritual Acts and Speech Acts*

Not only speech acts, but also rites, can be considered performative (in the strong illocutionary sense). Roy Rappaport makes this connection. Just as performative speech accomplishes what is being said in the act of saying it, performative action or ritual brings a state of affairs into being in the process of indicating this state of affairs,<sup>225</sup> so that participation in ritual does not only "indicate aspects of performers' contemporary states but impose transforming decisions on those states."<sup>226</sup> For example, the rite of circumcision does not only say something about the one circumcised and the household to which he belongs, it also brings about a change in their condition. As a rite of transition, circumcision does not only indicate that a change is taking place, it also effectively negotiates this transition to bring the participants in the ritual into a different state.

How does this transformation take place? Speech acts and rituals are both communicative actions, dependent on convention for their effects. Through the performance of conventional procedures that the public recognizes, conventional effects that the public accepts are also produced. "The transformation was, and could only be, effected by communicating meaning to whomever was the locus of transformation, and other concerned persons, in accordance with the conventions of the society in which it was occurring."<sup>227</sup> Rappaport gives the example of the Maring dance ritual, which is the conventional procedure for pledging help in times of war. To dance this ritual communicates to all concerned that a pledge to fight when needed is undertaken. The rite makes the performative explicit and weighty.

[T]he formality, solemnity and decorum of ritual infuses whatever performatives the ritual incorporates with a gravity that they otherwise might not possess. In sum, simply by making their performative explicit rituals

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<sup>225</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 107–8, 113–15.

<sup>226</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 107.

<sup>227</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 112.

make clear to their participants just what it is they are doing and thus they specify, at least tacitly, what would constitute an abuse or violation of whatever obligations those performatives entail.<sup>228</sup>

This implies that the performance of ritual is invested with morality. Participation in ritual brings with it certain obligations on the part of the performer as well as on the part of the participating audience. The obligations inherent in the ritual act thus become the standard by which to evaluate subsequent acts.<sup>229</sup>

Understanding the rite of circumcision in Exod 4:25 as a performative act brings with it certain implications regarding what the rite accomplishes, especially in bringing about a new state of affairs in terms of a new identity, vocation, and community. This will be expounded further in chap. 4.

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<sup>228</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 116.

<sup>229</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 132–33.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONFIGURATION: MEDIATING THE NARRATIVE WORLD

The configuration stage (*mimesis*<sub>2</sub>) focuses on what literary criticism traditionally understands as the plot. For Ricoeur, however, the plot is not a static set of internal structural relations, but a dynamic process of mediation operating at different levels: between the lived experience behind the text (*prefiguration*) and the lived experience in front of the text (*refiguration*), between individual incidents and the whole story, between discordant and diverse particulars and the concordant whole, and between time as a chronological sequence of events and time as a configured reality.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I explore these different mediations. I first look into how the different incidents in Exod 4:18–26, particularly the episode in 4:24–26, fit into the broader narrative unit of Exod 2:23–4:31. I then identify the discordant elements of the narrative, including its temporal discontinuities. These discordant elements include ethical expectations produced by the different actions in the text in the world of the reader and the world of the text. I then show how the configuration of the narrative achieves a synthesis of these heterogeneous factors, without completely overcoming the discordance. Lastly, I look at how the configurations of the narrative world open up different possibilities for Moses, the main character in the story, and for the self in response to the narrative world.

It must be kept in mind that the reader is the operator that sets these different mediations in motion. Thus, the work of configuration is not just a function of the text, but of the reader as well. I, as the real reader of the text, set the plot in motion. Indeed, the plot of the narrative brings about a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” and a “concordance out of discordance”; nevertheless, this process becomes operative only in the act of reading. The reading proposed below, therefore, comes as a result of the confluence between the action of the plot that “grasps together” diverse particulars into a concordant whole and a reflective

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 23–24.

act on my part as I read the narrative, work out its coherence, recognize its narrative schema, and reveal its capacity to be followed.

#### EXODUS 4:18–26 WITHIN THE BROADER NARRATIVE UNIT

Because the plot mediates between individual episodes and the story as a whole, an incident can no longer be considered an isolated occurrence, but must be seen in terms of its contribution to the progress of the whole narrative. The incidents in Exod 4:18–26 play the role of facilitating the transformation of Moses into a messenger who would effectively communicate Yahweh's message to Israel and to Pharaoh.

##### *The Thrust of the Narrative Unit*

The main movement of the second narrative unit in Exodus 1:1–14:31 (Exod 2:23–4:31)<sup>2</sup> focuses on how God has seen the oppressive plight of the Israelites, and how God is doing something about their situation by sending a messenger who will communicate to the people God's concern and intention to deliver them. This key theme is brought to the fore in the introduction (2:23–25), is reiterated in the middle section of the unit (3:7–10), and is recapitulated in the conclusion (4:31). The thrust of the unit then is the relationship of the people and God, in which God acknowledges the cry of the Israelites, and the Israelites acknowledge that God has heard them. This relationship between God and the Israelites is mediated by the figure of Moses.

##### *Setting the Stage: God Hears the Cry of Israel (2:23–25)*

The death of the old king (2:23) who was instrumental to the oppression of the Israelites (as told in Exodus 1) could have presumably introduced a new set of affairs that could have led to the alleviation of the suffering of the Israelites.<sup>3</sup> Just as a change of policy was effected when “a new king arose over Egypt who did not acknowledge<sup>4</sup> Joseph” (1:8), hope for a reversal of policy was ripe with the death of this king. However,

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 93–96.

<sup>3</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), 13; Fretheim, *Exodus* (see chap. 3, n. 3), 46; Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel* (see chap. 1, n. 1), 308.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase *לֹא יָדַע* here does not mean that the new king had no knowledge of Joseph, but that he did not value or honor what Joseph had done for Egypt. J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1971), 58.



no benevolent and compassionate ruler followed. Instead, the Israelites groaned and cried out under their slave labor (2:23), showing the continuance, and even the intensification, of the previous oppressive policy.

A change, however, is seen in the people's response in the second narrative unit. Although the first narrative unit (1:1–2:22; cf. 1:8–22) shows how the Israelites were subjected to forced labor and their male babies were killed, there is no record of their reaction to all these cruelties. It is only at the beginning of the second narrative unit that Israel's response is first mentioned.<sup>5</sup> From their powerless state, they groaned (וַיֵּאָנְחוּ) and cried out in protest (וַיִּזְעֻקוּ), seeking intervention in the face of an intolerable situation. The cry was not specifically directed to God,<sup>6</sup> but their plea for relief (שׁוּעָתָם) rose up to God and God heard their moaning (נִאֲקָתָם). As hope for any human intervention was dashed, the people let out their frustration, pain, and anguish in a communal scream.

Another, more significant, change is introduced in this second narrative unit (2:23–4:31). Just as the people's response is not mentioned in the first narrative unit, God's explicit reaction to what is being done to the Israelites is also not stated, although God's blessing is evident in the fruitfulness of the people in spite of constant threats (1:7, 12). God's providence is also seen in the preservation of the male babies through the help of the midwives (1:15–21), and in the finding of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter (2:1–10).<sup>7</sup> But in the second narrative unit, God's response to the people's anguished cry is underscored in the use of four verbs: God "heard" (וַיִּשְׁמַע) "remembered" (וַיִּזְכֹּר), "looked upon" (וַיִּרְא), "took notice" (וַיִּדַּע) (2:24–25).<sup>8</sup> Something is about to happen, which the introduction of a new human rule could not have initiated. God is about to intervene to bring about a change in the people's situation. The introduction closes with, "God saw the Israelites, and God knew . . .," with the direct object missing, a line which opens up possibilities as to how God will act.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, 299.

<sup>6</sup> James Plataras, *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Plataras, *Theology of Exodus*, 26–27.

<sup>8</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," vol. 1 of *NIB* (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 706.

*God Appoints a Messenger (3:1–10)*

The call narrative must be seen as the working out of the response of God to the people's cry in a specific, actionable way. It demonstrates in a concrete way that for God to hear, remember, look upon, and take notice is for God to act. God's first move, however, centers on the need for communication. God's deliverance requires the participation of the people needing deliverance. The Israelites (the victims of state policy) need to know that God is concerned about them, has not forgotten the covenant with their fathers, and is going to do something about their situation. They can then put themselves in a position to receive help and cooperate with God in bringing about the needed deliverance. Charles Isbell emphasizes this need for knowing:

[T]he God who *knows* is not *known* by those whom he would designate to be his people. . . . For the story to develop adequately the one who *knows* must be *known* (cf. 6:3b, 7), even as the one who *sees* must be *seen* and then must have his saving activity *seen* by his people before any substantive change in their situation can be made.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Pharaoh (the maker of state policy) needs to know that the Israelites are God's people and not Egyptian slaves, and God is now claiming God's rights over them. The necessity for communication highlights the need for a messenger who would bring God's message both to the Israelites and to Pharaoh.

Thus enters Moses. After the broad introductory statements that describe the people's condition and God's predisposition toward them (2:23–25), the next episode shifts to a specific locale somewhere beyond the desert of Midian, to Horeb, the mountain of God. A disjunctive phrase opens this episode, showing a break in the narrative: "Meanwhile, Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law . . ." (3:1). God catches Moses' attention through a bush that burns but is not burnt up, and calls Moses from the midst of the burning bush (3:2–4). The narrative break (3:1–5) serves not only to show the circumstances by which God appoints a messenger, but also reveals (as well as conceals) something about this God who seeks to intervene on Israel's behalf. Whereas the latter part of the first narrative unit (1:1–2:22) shows what

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Isbell, "Exodus 1–2 in the Context of Exodus 1–14: Story Lines and Key Words," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (ed. David Clines et al.; Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 56; also quoted more fully by Oosthuizen, "Some Thoughts," (see chap. 1, n. 24), 19.

Moses is like (2:11–22), this second narrative unit (2:23–4:31) focuses on what God is like.

God's introductory words look back to the past and serve to remind Moses about the past: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (3:6). The reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, traverses back to generations even before Moses was born, and alludes to the promises God made to Moses' ancestors.<sup>11</sup> There is an implicit assumption here that Moses has forgotten his ancestral heritage. Thus, the repeated naming acts as a mnemonic device for Moses to recall God's special relationship with his ancestors, and to remind him of his continuity and identity with them.

From the memory of the past, Exod 3:7–10 shifts back to the present and picks up the theme introduced in 2:23–25. Many of the words used in 2:23–25 are repeated<sup>12</sup> but there is now a shift from the third person to the first person. Now, Yahweh declares involvement: *I have seen, I have heard, I have known, I have come down*.<sup>13</sup> The repetition becomes a reminder to Moses about the Israelite's plight in Egypt.

Divine involvement, however, is mediated through human participation. So God commands Moses: **ועתה לכה ואשלחך אל-פרעה והוצא את-עמי בני-ישראל ממצרים** "Now, go and I shall send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (3:10).

### *Objections and Negotiations (3:11–4:17)*

The call narrative of Moses (or vocation narrative) follows the standard plot line of some call narratives in the First Testament, whose main elements are: (1) divine appearance or confrontation; (2) introductory word; (3) commission; (4) objection; (5) reassurance; and (6) sign.<sup>14</sup> This structure, however, is not present in all call narratives. For example, in the case of Isaiah and Ezekiel, there are no objections to the commission itself.<sup>15</sup> In fact, instead of objecting, Isaiah volunteers, while Ezekiel

<sup>11</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> The root words that are repeated are: **ראה, שמע, ידע, צעק**.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase "I have come down" indicates God's decisive involvement in human affairs. See Sarna, *Exodus*, 15, citing Gen 11:5, 7: 18:21; Exod 19:11, 18, 20; 34:5; Num 11:17, 25; 12:5; 2 Sam 22:10; Ps 18:10; Isa 31:4; Neh 9:13.

<sup>14</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 51; George W. Coats, *Exodus 1–18* (FOTL IIA; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 34–42; Norman Habel, "Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *JAW* 77 (1965): 298–301. Cf. the call narratives of the following: Gideon (Judg 6:11–24); Jeremiah (Jer 1:1–19).

<sup>15</sup> See Isa 6:1–13 and Ezek 1–2.

is so overwhelmed by the presence of God that there is no room for protestation. Aside from this over-all structure, the call narrative of Moses exhibits further features present in other call narratives. One is the sense of awe and unworthiness at the presence of the deity, and the other is God's purification or empowerment in the area of speech.<sup>16</sup>

These recurring features are a function of sedimentation. According to Ricoeur, tradition is characterized by the interplay of sedimentation and innovation. Sedimentation refers to the elements that are typical, making a certain work recognizable as belonging to a certain mode or form. Innovation refers to the elements that are singular, which make a work distinct from others of the same form.<sup>17</sup>

The singular characteristics of the call narrative of Moses revolve around two innovative features: (1) the extended objection-reassurance section; and (2) the abrupt ending which leaves a gap regarding how the state of affairs between God and Moses actually ended.

Although objections springing from feelings of unworthiness are not unusual in call narratives, this feature never becomes extended and developed to the same degree as in the call narrative of Moses.<sup>18</sup> In the Gideon and Jeremiah account, for example, the objection portion is short. After the assurance from God, no other objection is offered, indicating that the commission has been accepted.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of Moses, the objection-assurance portion goes through five cycles, with the last one having more the nature of a refusal than an objection. The five cycles can be summarized as follows:

First Cycle (3:11–12)

Moses: Who am I?

God: I shall be with you.

Second Cycle (3:13–22)

Moses: What if they ask me your name? What shall I tell them?

God: יהוה has sent you.

<sup>16</sup> Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (see chap. 3, n. 10), 66–69. The sense of fear, awe, and unworthiness is present in all the call narratives (Judg 6:15, 22–23; Jer 1:6; Isa 6:5; Ezek 1:28; Exod 3:6, 11, 4:10), while God's enabling in the area of speech can be seen in all the prophetic call narratives. God purifies Isaiah's lips (Isa 6:6–7), puts words in the mouths of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 1:9; Ezek 2:8–3:3), and assures Moses that God will teach him what he is to speak (Exod 4:11–12).

<sup>17</sup> See p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. F. V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israel's Identity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 79.

<sup>19</sup> In the case of Gideon, it is the assurance and sign portion that is extended.

## Third Cycle (4:1–9)

Moses: They will not believe me

God: Signs will confirm your calling.

Sign: God gives three signs. The rod turns into a snake and turns back into the rod again. Moses' hand becomes leprous and then becomes clean. The waters of the Nile will turn into blood.

## Fourth Cycle (4:10–12)

Moses: I am not a man of words. I get tongue-tied.

God: I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to say.

## Fifth Cycle (4:13–17)

Moses: Lord, send somebody else.

*The anger of Yahweh blazed against Moses.*

God: Aaron shall be your spokesperson.

The first objection has to do with Moses' feelings of unworthiness, the second and third with the possible skeptical responses of the people to Moses' message, and the fourth goes back again to the personal element, this time dealing with inadequacy in terms of speaking ability. In this way, all the traditional objections—unworthiness, inadequate speech, lack of credibility—are brought into the narrative. The narrative's use of the array of possible objections, one after the other, in spite of God's repeated assurances, builds up an image of Moses as a reluctant messenger.

However, the extended objection scene fulfils other functions, aside from the portrayal of Moses as an unwilling servant. It also allows other materials to be brought in, most importantly the exposition on God's name (3:14–15), thus also contributing to the portrayal of God. Moreover, the messages to be delivered to the Israelites and to Pharaoh are stated more explicitly (3:16–18). God's message to the Israelites repeats God's introductory words to Moses (3:6), but shifts from prodding Moses' individual memory to addressing the collective memory of the Israelite community. Moses is to remind the community of God's commitment and relationship with their common ancestors, and how God continues to deal in the same way with the present generation (3:16–17). These messages are to be accompanied by signs (4:6–9), anticipating the wonders that God will perform in Egypt to compel Pharaoh to let the people go (3:19–20).

As was stated above, the fifth cycle has the nature more of a refusal than an objection. The form is that of a plea: **בִּי אֲדֹנִי שְׁלַח-נָא בֵּי-יָד-תְּשַׁלַּח** ("Pardon me, Lord, but send by the hand of whom you will send," or

“send whomever you wish,” which is a polite way of saying “Yes, do send someone, but there are others aside from me”) (4:13).<sup>20</sup> Moses finally reveals his misgivings—he is unenthusiastic about the task and would rather opt out, but is too polite or cowardly to say this outright. Thus, he keeps on giving objections, one after the other, until all possible objections are exhausted. God takes his objections seriously and gives a concrete response to reassure Moses each time, but Moses is not interested in being reassured. He wants out, and finally blurts this out.<sup>21</sup> Moses’ continued hesitancy after all the assurances and, finally, his polite refusal, puts into question whether feelings of unworthiness, limitations in speech, lack of knowledge about God’s name, or the people’s possible negative response and disbelief, are the real reasons for his unwillingness to go. Are there other reasons lurking in the background, which Moses does not want to admit?

“The anger of the LORD burned against Moses” (4:14 NASB). The obvious reluctance of Moses, even after God has considered each of the objections seriously and has given an appropriate assurance,<sup>22</sup> pushes God’s patience to the limit. Still, God listens to the objection and does appoint another person—Aaron, Moses’ brother—who will act as the spokesperson for Moses, while Moses continues his role as the spokesperson of God. With the appointment of Aaron, God puts a stop to the dialogue. Moses’ final plea shows that, in spite of all the talk and assurances, he is not really open for change; thus, a continuing dialogue would be fruitless. God grants Moses a companion, but does not free him from his task and responsibility.<sup>23</sup> He would still be the primary vehicle for God’s plan for Israel, with Aaron playing only a secondary role. This time, however, God does not allow Moses to negotiate. God commands Moses to make Aaron the spokesperson and to take the rod by which Moses will perform wonders. God also reiterates the promise to teach Moses, as well as Aaron, what they are to say. But there is no longer any room for negotiations. God has made his final say.

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<sup>20</sup> Or, in Cassuto’s (*Exodus* [see chap. 3, n. 7], 49) rendering: “O Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of whom Thou wilt send—except me.” This is in contrast to Isaiah’s response: “Here I am, send me” (Isa 6:8).

<sup>21</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 73; Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26” (see chap. 3, n. 28), 101. As Childs (*Exodus* [see chap. 1, n. 24], 79) puts it, Moses can no longer delay the inevitable; he either goes or refuses.

<sup>22</sup> Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26,” 101.

<sup>23</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 79.

The finality of God's directive seems to indicate that the matter has been resolved and that Moses has finally accepted his commission.<sup>24</sup> Yet the abrupt ending leaves a gap as to what is going on between Moses and God. Is Moses finally accepting the commission? Has he overcome his objections and disinclination for the task? Or is it rather, as Oosthuizen suggests, that Moses still does not share Yahweh's point of view, and Moses' reticence is an indication of his disagreement with Yahweh?<sup>25</sup> Or, perhaps, Moses has bracketed out from his memory his own links with Israel's ancestors and the plight of his people in Egypt, and not all of God's prodding could unblock what Moses refuses to acknowledge.

What about God's point of view? Has God's anger abated? Is God settling for a servant who is going because he has no choice, but who is really unwilling to fulfill the task that has been assigned to him? The narrative does not give any explicit indications as to how the episode ends for both God and Moses.

*Conclusion: Israel's Acknowledgment of God's Response (4:27–31)*

When we come to the conclusion, we see the appointed messenger, Moses, meeting his brother Aaron, and them going together to the elders of Israel to convey God's message of concern and deliverance for the people of Israel. There is no sign of the hesitant Moses of the earlier episode. On the part of Israel, there is also no hint of resistance to or disbelief in God's message, or to Moses or Aaron as the bearers of the message.<sup>26</sup> Instead, the people welcomed the announcement of God's involvement in their affairs: "When they heard *that* Yahweh had taken notice (פָּקַד)<sup>27</sup> of the Israelites and *that* he had seen their affliction, they bowed down in worship" (4:31). Just as God's response to the people's cry is underscored by four verbs, four verbs also emphasize

<sup>24</sup> Goldingay, "Circumcision" (see chap. 3, n. 125), 12; Cassuto, *Exodus*, 52. Cf. Noth, *Exodus* (see chap. 3, n. 2), 47, who believes that the silence of Moses indicates readiness to obey God's command.

<sup>25</sup> Oosthuizen, "Thoughts," 21.

<sup>26</sup> Noth, *Exodus*, 50–51.

<sup>27</sup> The verb פָּקַד has a wide range of meanings. In its narrow, most basic sense, it refers to an officer arriving unexpectedly to inspect his troops. George A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 36. The idea of inspection, of seeing things for oneself, is broadened in this context to mean, "to take an interest in," "to look after, inquire about, take care of someone." G. André, "פָּקַד," *TDOT* 12:54. God is mindful of what is happening to the Israelites and has not forgotten them.

the people's response to God's message through Moses and Aaron. The people believed (וַיֵּאֱמָנוּ), they heard (וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ), they bowed down (וַיִּקְדּוּ), and they knelt (וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ).

The narrative unit began with the people's anguished scream toward nobody in particular. Under unbearable circumstances, they groaned and moaned. They pleaded for help and cried out in protest. The people's cry was not specifically directed to God, but God heard, took notice, and responded by sending a messenger to communicate God's concern for them. Thus, the narrative unit ends with the people in silent homage and thanksgiving to the God who has given them special attention. The circle of divine-human interaction becomes complete.<sup>28</sup> The sigh of despair has turned into a glimmer of hope at the possibility of relief.

### *In-Between Places and Rites of Passage*

It is in light of the thrust of the broader unit that the incidents in Exod 4:18–26 need to be seen. The passage acts as a transition from God's initial call to Moses in Midian to the outworking of this call in Egypt. It shows Moses saying goodbye to his wife's family, leaving Midian with his wife and children, and then traveling on the way to Egypt. The episode interrupts the main flow of the narrative and has both continuities and discontinuities with the previous and following episodes. On one hand, certain themes from the call episode (the command to go, Pharaoh's refusal to let the people go, the performance of wonders) are repeated in God's instructions to Moses. On the other hand, new elements are introduced with the focus on the family—its migrations, farewells, and concern for its members.

The call of Yahweh to Moses entails a change of place—from Midian to Egypt. It also involves a change in Moses' status: from a fugitive and shepherd of his father-in-law's flock to that of a prophet and servant of Yahweh. The change in status does not only pertain to his life in Midian, however. Before Moses left Egypt, he was considered an Egyptian in Pharaoh's court. The text points out that "he became her son" (וַיְהִי לָהּ לְבֶן) (2:10), referring to Moses being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. As the son of an Egyptian princess, Moses became one of "them," one who belonged to the household of the oppressor.<sup>29</sup> He lived

<sup>28</sup> Claus Westermann emphasizes this element of divine-human interaction in *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (trans. Douglas W. Scott; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 10–34.

<sup>29</sup> Isbell, "Exodus 1–2," 41.



a life of privilege, being spared from the degradations that his kin and people suffered.<sup>30</sup> Yet the narrative is careful to point out the Hebrew character of his birth and early upbringing. His parents are from the tribe of Levi (2:1), and he was weaned by his Hebrew mother (2:7–9).<sup>31</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that when he grew up, he would feel the stirrings of identification with the people of his own ethnicity. The text emphasizes the affinity between Moses and the Hebrews by repeating אחי “his brothers” (2:11),<sup>32</sup> showing how Moses viewed the Israelites.<sup>33</sup>

However, his attempts to intervene in the sufferings of his kinfolk from an Egyptian position of privilege led to the loss of that privilege. He became a murderer, then an outlaw and a fugitive. He was forced to leave his Egyptian household and his Egyptian identity was put into question as Pharaoh tried to kill him (2:15). Yet neither was he embraced by his fellow Israelites. From the perspective of the Hebrews the murder of the Egyptian was not an act of solidarity, but just another form of abuse of power by an oppressive Egyptian ruler.<sup>34</sup> “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” asked one of the Hebrews. “Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (2:14). In spite of Moses’ being in the place of power (and more likely, because of it), his efforts failed because, in the eyes of his brothers, he remained an outsider.

Moses himself, as Joseph Walters suggests, may not have made the move to embracing completely his Hebrew identity. To the daughters of Jethro, for whom he drew water from the well, he looked like an “Egyptian” (2:19). This suggests that “Moses may have longed for his people, and may have wanted to help them, but at best he was a covert Hebrew concealed in an Egyptian identity.”<sup>35</sup> Moses was a man “caught between two worlds.”<sup>36</sup> Caroline Peyser, in a psychological reading, suggests that Moses’ adoption into an Egyptian household, after being borne and raised by a Hebrew mother, may have had a profound effect

<sup>30</sup> Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper, 1958), 36–37.

<sup>31</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Buber, *Moses*, 36; Sarna, *Exodus*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Bryna Jocheved Levy, “Moshe: Portrait of the Leader as a Young Man,” in *Torah of the Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts* (ed. Ora Wiskind Elper and Susan Handelman; New York: Urim, 2000), 414.

<sup>34</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Walters, “Moses at the Lodging Place: The Devil is in the Ambiguities,” *Enc* 63 (2002): 422.

<sup>36</sup> Ackerman, “Miriam and Zipporah” (see chap. 3, n. 178), 72. The name of Moses itself is a hybrid, since it is both an Israelite name and an Egyptian name. See Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 62–63.

on his emerging identity, resulting in a conflicted self.<sup>37</sup> This conflict is manifested at the birth of Moses' son. "It is only at this moment, through the naming of his own son, that he can articulate with clarity the effects of his abrupt separation from his biological mother. He recognizes that he never truly belonged in the house of Pharaoh; he was always a stranger there."<sup>38</sup> Although Peyser speculates too much by attributing Moses' conflicted identity to the effect of being separated from his Hebrew mother, she is right in identifying an internal conflict in Moses, which he articulated only in the naming of his newborn son.

Considered neither fully an Egyptian nor an Israelite and having lost his place in both peoples, Moses regarded himself as a *גר*, an alien in a foreign land (*בארץ נכריה*) (2:22). A *גר* is a person who, voluntarily or involuntarily, has been disconnected from his or her original social setting and now lives in a new social setting in which he or she does not enjoy the same privileges as the "native-born" members of society.<sup>39</sup> Such a person lives more or less permanently among the members of the new community, but does not fully become one of them.<sup>40</sup> The verb which Moses used to describe his status as a *גר* is a *qatal* verb (*גר הייתי*), which is ambiguous.<sup>41</sup> On one hand, it can be translated "I have become" (NIV), referring to Moses becoming an alien in Midian. More likely, it means "I have been" or "I was" (NRSV, NJPS), referring to Moses' experience of being an alien in Egypt.<sup>42</sup> The name Gershom supports the latter, since it consists of two words that sound like *גר* ("alien") and *שם* ("there").<sup>43</sup> In any case, the ambiguity underscores the lack in Moses of a real sense of belonging to any group, whether Israelite, Egyptian, or Midianite.

<sup>37</sup> Caroline Peyser, "The Book of Exodus: A Search for Identity," in Elper and Handelman, *Torah of the Mothers*, 380, 388. Cf. Herbert Rand, "Moses at the Inn: New Light on an Obscure Text," *Dor le Dor* 14 (1985): 33–34, who thinks that Moses' anxieties, self-doubt, and speech impediment arise from being separated from his parents at an early age.

<sup>38</sup> Peyser, "Search for Identity," 390.

<sup>39</sup> Frank Anthony Spina, "Israelites as *gerim*: Sojourners in Social and Historical Context," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 323.

<sup>40</sup> Rolf Rendtorff, "The *Gēr* in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 85.

<sup>41</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 67; Peyser, "Search for Identity," 390.

<sup>43</sup> Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Waterloo, Ontario: Herald, 2000), 48.

But now, he is going back to Egypt, on a mission that would require a change in status. "When he returns to Egypt, he appears before Pharaoh, neither as the adopted son of the Egyptian princess, nor as a fugitive from the law. Rather, he makes his entrance only in his new role as leader of the Hebrews seeking their release."<sup>44</sup> As for the Israelites, they must regard him not only as kin, but also as an authentic prophet of the God of their ancestors, an able spokesperson on their behalf before Pharaoh, and one who can successfully lead them out of the affliction they have endured for many years.

Exod 4:18–31 is a transitional episode which tells of a rite of passage that enables Moses to make the change from his privileged life in Egypt, and from being a refugee and an alien in Midian, to his new life among his kin and to his new role as God's spokesperson. Rites of passage are "ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation or state to another or from one cosmic or social world to another."<sup>45</sup> They mark significant points in the movement of an individual through life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. However, rites of passage are not simply confined to life crises; they also accompany any change of social place, status, maturity, socio-economic position, caste, physical location, mental or emotional condition, health, war and peace, scarcity or plenty.<sup>46</sup> They may mark the entry of a person into a new achieved status or into membership with a group and may qualify them for official duties in the cult.<sup>47</sup>

Exod 4:18–31 incorporates the three phases in Van Gennep's rites of passage: (1) rites of separation; (2) rites of transition (liminal rites); and (3) rites of incorporation.<sup>48</sup> The goodbye ritual (4:18) is a rite of separation. Moses asks for permission from his father-in-law to go back

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<sup>44</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (see chap. 3, n. 177), 11. The use of ritual processes to read biblical texts is explored in *Semeia* 67 (1995) with the title *Transformations, Passages, and Processes: Ritual Approaches to Biblical Texts*, edited by Mark McVann and Bruce Malina.

<sup>46</sup> Timothy Carson, *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997), 3. Cf. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–94.

<sup>47</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 95.

<sup>48</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 11. The three phases may not all be prominent in specific cases. Funerary rites would emphasize rites of separation, marriage ceremonies would deal more with rites of incorporation, while pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation would revolve around rites of transition. See also Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94–95.

to Egypt and is granted that permission, receiving Jethro's blessing. The short rite enables Moses to detach himself from his status as a shepherd of his father-in-law's flock, a son-in-law living in his father-in-law's household, and a resident alien of Midian. On the other hand, Aaron's welcoming kiss to Moses (4:27–28) is a rite of incorporation.<sup>49</sup> It is an act of recognition and inclusion, which considers Moses as a legitimate member of an Israelite clan. Part of the process of incorporation is sharing stories, which is what Moses does in reporting to Aaron what transpired between him and God. The telling of this memory serves as a link between the past incidents in the life of Moses and the present event. The reception given by the elders to the presence and words of Moses and Aaron further solidifies Moses' relation to the community (4:29–31).<sup>50</sup> He is accepted as one sent by the "God of their ancestors." Moses is no longer an outsider or an alien. Despite the fact that the Israelites remain aliens in Egypt, Moses by going back to Egypt finally comes home to his own people and finds his true vocation.

Moses' incorporation in 4:18–31 is the opposite of his rejection in 2:11–22. Oosthuizen, drawing from Cazeaux, suggests a chiasmic arrangement between the two.<sup>51</sup> In 2:11–22, Moses is rejected by his fellow Israelites. He then becomes the object of Pharaoh's murderous intentions, and flees to Midian. In 4:18–31, Moses departs from Midian. He then becomes the object of Yahweh's "murderous intentions," but he is accepted by his brothers. Oosthuizen expounds:

[T]he careful structuring of the story appears to deliberately indicate the transformation between a Moses who previously was rejected by his fellow-countrymen and who fled from the real scene of the action to Midian, and a Moses who returns to Egypt and is accepted by his brothers. It suggests that a decisive change has taken place in Midian where Moses has received the divine commission to lead the people out of Egypt.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> The different forms of greeting are considered by Van Gennep (*Rites of Passage*, 32–33) as part of the rites of incorporation. Houtman (*Exodus*, 451) thinks that the word נשק ("to kiss") is used here to describe the greeting ritual, which may include embracing and weeping with joy.

<sup>50</sup> Ackerman ("Miriam and Zipporah," 75) also sees Aaron's kiss and the Israelites' acceptance of what Moses said as a dramatic moment of integration.

<sup>51</sup> Oosthuizen, "Thoughts," 16, following J. Cazeaux, "Naître en Égypte: Exode 1–7:7. Étude littéraire," *RHPR* 60 (1980): 404, 414.

<sup>52</sup> Oosthuizen, "Thoughts," 17.

*Exodus 4:24–26 as a Liminal Experience*

In many ways, the sojourn of Moses in Midian can be considered a liminal experience.<sup>53</sup> In Midian, Moses was neither here nor there, no longer a part of the structure of Egyptian court life or of the intimate relations of an Israelite clan or family. Although he was a member of a Midianite household, he remained a גֵר, with no rank or special privileges in a foreign land. In the wilderness, among the sheep, he became a nondescript shepherd of a flock that belonged to someone else. Turner describes transitional beings as having “structural invisibility.” They have nothing, possess no status, property, or rank and their position is normally passive or humble.<sup>54</sup> It is in such a passive state that they are able to receive the communication of the *sacra*, which endows them with powers and prepares them to embrace their new station in life.<sup>55</sup> Moses was in this lowly, anonymous state when God appeared to him and communicated the mystery of God’s name. This divine communication at the mountain becomes the key to Moses’ new role as leader of a people who are also transitioning to a new structure—from being state slaves and aliens in Egypt to being a free people under God with their own land, laws, and institutions.<sup>56</sup> In Midian Moses “is at a liminal moment in his life, moving to a new identity.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 65–66. Ackermann (“Miriam and Zipporah,” 72) notes how the life story of Moses is full of liminal markers. For Ackerman, the liminal experience of Moses began in Egypt, when he was a Hebrew slave residing in the Egyptian palace, so that the sojourn in Midian is but an extension of this liminality. Ackerman’s reading, however, obscures Van Gennep’s tripartite structure of separation–transition–aggregation, or Turner’s structure–anti-structure scheme. The essence of a transition is that it moves the subject from a structured state back to another structured state. “[T]he candidate returns to his starting point. He, not his home, has changed.” Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (see chap. 3, n. 4), 35. In Ackerman’s reading, Moses already begins his life in a liminal state, which discounts the need for transition. In my reading, the sojourn in Midian enables Moses to move from the social structure of the Egyptian palace to the social structure of the Israelite community. The initial effort of Moses to identify with the Hebrews failed (2:11–14) because he still had not made the transition from one structure to the other. Although he wanted to help his kinfolk, he was still operating from an Egyptian structure. Instead of an extended liminal experience for Moses, perhaps it is better to see Moses’ life as going from one liminal experience to another (John Goldingay, written comments).

<sup>54</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 98; *Ritual Process*, 95.

<sup>55</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

<sup>56</sup> Israel’s journey from Egypt to Canaan has also been described as a rite of passage. See p. 137.

<sup>57</sup> Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 704.

Within the larger transitional period of the sojourn in Midian, however, is a narrower, more intense liminal experience, which brings to a climax and closure the life of Moses in Midian. In this short passage, the themes connected with liminality— anonymity, ambiguity, passivity, death and growth, continuity and discontinuity—become intensified.

Between Midian and Egypt, Yahweh attacks one of the travelers at a stopping place in the night. The ambiguity and liminality of the event are heightened by the fact that it occurs at an unnamed stopping place on the journey.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the object of attack remains anonymous and passive throughout the incident, characteristics typical of a liminal subject. The ambiguity and strangeness of the event are underscored by the fact that in the immediately preceding incident, God has just commissioned Moses to go back to Egypt, to be God's instrument in the deliverance of Israel.<sup>59</sup> "[E]ven as they presage a new chapter, these narratives echo contrapuntal themes that put the success of the undertaking in doubt from the very start."<sup>60</sup> Lawrence Kaplan notes how this passage is an exception to the moral and religious clarity found elsewhere in the book of Exodus.<sup>61</sup> The action of the deity has puzzled many, to the point that God has been characterized in this passage as having demonic qualities.<sup>62</sup>

Many have observed the links of this passage with the angel's struggle with Jacob near the Yabbok River (Gen 32:25–33 [24–32]).<sup>63</sup> Both Moses and Jacob are journeying back to their place of origin. Both have a dangerous encounter with God at night, which is preceded, however, by a favorable divine encounter (Gen 28; Exod 3). Both episodes are

<sup>58</sup> Seth Kunin, "The Bridegroom of Blood: A Structuralist Analysis," *JSTOT* 70 (1996): 6.

<sup>59</sup> This is a common observation among commentators: Childs, *Exodus*, 95; Cassuto, *Exodus*, 58; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 233; Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband," 46.

<sup>60</sup> Nanette Stahl, *Law and Liminality in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>61</sup> Lawrence Kaplan, "'And the Lord Sought to Kill Him' (Exod 4:24): Yet Once Again," *HAR* 5 (1981): 71.

<sup>62</sup> P. Volz, *Das Dämonische in Jahwe* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1924); David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast? Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 67–79; Hyatt, *Exodus*, 87.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Römer, "De l'Archaique au subversif: Le cas d'Exode 4/24–26," *ETR* 69 (1994): 5; Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," (see chap. 3, n. 4), 451–52; Frank Michaeli, *Le livre de l'Exode* (CAT; Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1974), 62; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 81; Durham, *Exodus* (see chap. 3, n. 5), 59; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (see chap. 3, n. 3), 111; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 242; Hyatt, *Exodus*, 87; Janzen, *Exodus*, 86.

followed by a scene of reconciliation with their brothers. Both men experience a change of status, marked in Jacob's case by the change of name, in Moses, by the rite of circumcision.<sup>64</sup> The two events then have in common that they are both liminal experiences,<sup>65</sup> which are integral to a rite of passage, resulting in a transformation of identity.<sup>66</sup>

Liminal events have to do with change since they negotiate the transition from the old to the new, from past to present, from one structure to the next.<sup>67</sup> It is in liminal spaces that people are transformed.<sup>68</sup> Ambiguities and uncertainties are typical of transitions,<sup>69</sup> because both destabilization and continuity occur at the same time.<sup>70</sup> Yet it is the very ambiguity, anonymity, destabilization, and the lack of clear-cut moral boundaries typical of transitional experiences that make change possible. The knowledge gained in the liminal period imbues the subject with the characteristics of the new state, and a change in one's being occurs. Although liminality negates positive structural assertions, it is also the source of these positive assertions, because from a liminal experience arise new possibilities and configurations.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, a liminal experience is a transformative experience.<sup>72</sup> At the threshold of a new community, a new status, and a new vocation, conventional understandings and actions of Yahweh are suspended and even negated, and this opens the way for transformation to take place.

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<sup>64</sup> Römer, "De l'Archaïque au subversif," 5; Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," 451–52.

<sup>65</sup> Stahl, *Law and Liminality*, 77, n. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 84.

<sup>67</sup> Carson, *Liminal Reality*, 1–14.

<sup>68</sup> Kunin, "Bridegroom," lists three types of liminal spaces in Hebrew myths, each of which is associated with a particular type of transformation. Liminal spaces can either be a mountain or a raised place, a pit, or a flat ambiguous geological plane. Mountains are associated with acts of sacrifice (the sacrifice of Isaac) and pits with murder (Joseph in the pit). The former is positive in that the tie between generations is preserved, while the latter is negative and creates opposition between the actors. The third type of liminal space, that of an ambiguous flat place like a wilderness, river, etc. (Israel in the wilderness, Moses in the wilderness) has both positive and negative elements. In this passage, elements of murder (God tried to kill Moses) and sacrifice (circumcision acting as a sacrifice) are both present. Texts dealing with ambiguous spaces (like Jacob wrestling with the angel at the river) involve a divine or ambiguous figure as the one doing the transformation. See Kunin, "Bridegroom," 6–9.

<sup>69</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Stahl, *Law and Liminality*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 97.

<sup>72</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 102.

This episode then enables Moses to make a successful transition that would make it possible for him to negotiate change from his previous privileged life in Egypt and from being a refugee and alien in Midian, to a new life back in Egypt, this time as the messenger of Yahweh.

### *Discordance Threatening Concordance*

According to Ricoeur, a narrative is made up of heterogeneous and discordant elements, which can threaten the coherence of the plot.<sup>73</sup> These discordant elements keep the narrative moving and help to retain the interest of the reader, but if brought to the point of serious disconnection, they can undermine the narrative nature of the material. Exod 4:18–26 exhibits dislocations, juxtapositions, and unexpected twists that can potentially overwhelm the concordant features of the narrative. At the same time, the narrative is made up of heterogeneous particulars: different speech acts, basic actions, diverse symbols and temporalities, which have ethical significance.

Commentators have noted the disparate nature of this section.<sup>74</sup> Thus, there are materials that look like the beginnings of the implementation of God's commission, then a repetition of the command and some of the instructions, and then a strange, almost frightening narrative that seems to contradict all the elements that have gone before.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, 4:24–26 seems to be an isolated episode in relation to all the other incidents in 2:23–4:31, which at least can be related to each other through verbal cues and thematic links, so much so that the entire narrative unit can be read more smoothly by omitting this passage.<sup>76</sup>

### *Temporal Dislocations*

Fretheim notes how temporal relationships in 4:18–26 are uncertain.<sup>77</sup> Although the narrative seems to move in a general chronological order, there are materials that could possibly be placed in a different

<sup>73</sup> See p. 24 and the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>74</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 24; Durham, *Exodus*, 53–54. Morgenstern ("Bloody Husband," 38) thinks that vv. 24–26 has no immediate narrative or literary connection with the preceding or following verses.

<sup>75</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 54.

<sup>76</sup> Rainer Kessler, "Psychoanalysis as a Hermeneutical Tool: the Example of Ex. 4:24–26," in *God, Biblical Stories, and Psychoanalytic Understanding* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 30–31; Josiah Derby, "Why Did God Want to Kill Moses?" *JBQ* 18 (1989–90): 226.

<sup>77</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 75.



temporal context, thus disrupting the sequential flow of the narrative. The opening of the narrative itself has a straightforward temporal sequence. Moses, after the call of God at the mountain, goes back to his father-in-law's household in Midian. He then asks permission from Jethro to leave for Egypt, after which Jethro gives his permission and blessing (4:18).

Temporally, the next scene should be the departure of Moses for Egypt. Instead, we have a speech from God commanding Moses to return to Egypt (4:19). Considering that Moses has already asked permission from Jethro to depart, God's command seems redundant and inconsistent.<sup>78</sup> Why is God repeating the instruction to go back to Egypt, after Moses has already decided to leave? Verse 19 begins as if v. 18 is not known.<sup>79</sup>

The intervening speech has the effect of producing a delay in the departure, even as it stresses the urgency of going back to Egypt. The command, given in Midian, seems to be a continuation of the commission scene,<sup>80</sup> containing an assurance element (4:19), which is typical of call narratives. Yet it is disconnected from that scene, and is placed after Moses has already given notice to his father-in-law that he is leaving.<sup>81</sup>

The next verse (v. 20) is the logical chronological sequence to v. 18. Moses takes his wife and sons, mounts them on an ass, and then departs for Egypt. No time indicator is given to show how much time has elapsed after the farewell to Jethro and the actual departure. But a phrase is tucked in at the end of the verse: "and Moses took the rod of God in his hand" (4:20). The phrase harks back again to the commission scene, and shows the carrying out of what is commanded in 4:17.

<sup>78</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 105; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 191; Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:421.

<sup>79</sup> Elias Auerbach, *Moses* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 46. The redundancy has often been attributed to different sources. See S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1911), 30.

<sup>80</sup> The links with the commission scene are such that Terry John Lehan proposes that Moses has not really left the mountain of God (he notes 4:27 in which Aaron meets Moses at the mountain). According to him, when the attack in 4:24–27 occurred, Zipporah was alone with her son Gershom; however, a displacement in the text has taken place to make the sequence of events confusing. See "Zipporah and the Passover," *JBQ* 24 (1996): 47–48.

<sup>81</sup> The LXX inserts at the beginning of 4:19 a repetition of the introduction to 2:23: μετὰ δὲ τὰς ἡμέρας τὰς πολλὰς ἐκεῖνας ἐτελεύτησεν ὁ βασιλεὺς Αἰγύπτου ("After those many days, the king of Egypt died"), thus putting a temporal distance between Moses' initial request for permission to leave, and his actual departure. See p. 243 for a discussion.

The travel back to Egypt is interrupted by another speech from God (4:21–23), which again takes one back to the commission scene, repeating and expounding material given before (cf. 3:19–20). As in v. 19, in which the divine speech presupposes that Moses has not yet decided to return (hence the command to go back to Egypt), this second speech also presupposes that Moses has not yet departed,<sup>82</sup> yet in the narrative it is placed after the departure. Again, this has the effect of breaking the forward momentum of the return, as things seem to move back to events prior to the departure, and as the speech interrupts the account of the return.<sup>83</sup> God seems to be nudging Moses' memory constantly of what happened at the mountain, and of God's command for Moses to return to Egypt.

Yet even as the timing of God's speeches retards the movement of the narrative, the content of the speeches looks forward to the future. This is particularly true of the second speech (4:21–23). First, it anticipates the signs and wonders which Moses, by God's command and empowerment, will perform before Pharaoh. Here, the *w-qatalti* form, **ועשיתם** ("you shall execute"), used as an imperative, refers to remote action, or an action not in the immediate future.<sup>84</sup> Although there is an element of the present in God's command, in that Moses is to consider these signs and wonders as he journeys back to Egypt, the execution of the task itself belongs to the future, after Moses' arrival in Egypt. Second, the divine speech anticipates God's future course of action toward Pharaoh and the latter's negative reaction to Moses' message. Third, it looks forward to the time when Moses will face Pharaoh and deliver the prophetic warning of God's impending judgment on Pharaoh's house. While all these events are still in the future, the prophetic message itself is couched in the language of the present. The verbs are no longer in the future and Yahweh's speech to Pharaoh is expressed as if it is already the existing state of affairs: "I have told you: 'Set my son free, that he may serve me.' But you have refused to set him free; here now, I am going to slay your son, your firstborn." This highlights the imminence and certainty of God's threat.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Noth, *Exodus*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> The section is seen to be added by a later editor as an afterthought; cf. Plastaras, *God of the Exodus*, 109.

<sup>84</sup> Jöüon § 114m.

<sup>85</sup> See chap. 3, n. 27.

But even the first divine speech (4:19) itself has a forward element in that it anticipates the change in Moses' personal circumstances once he arrives in Egypt. Yet even as the speech moves the narrative forward, it also gives a backward glance to Moses' pre-Midian days, harking back to the time when Moses fled Egypt because of Pharaoh's threat to his life. The speech seeks to awaken Moses' memory regarding events prior to his migration to Midian, events which he may have deliberately set aside and forgotten in his desire to settle permanently away from Egypt.

The backward and forward movement of the narrative serves to underscore the transitional character of this episode. Even as its main focus is Moses' present migration journey, it is distended, to use Augustine's term, backward into the past (to the more remote events before Moses' arrival in Midian, as well as to the immediate events in the mountain prior to the journey) and forward into the future (to Moses' coming encounter with Pharaoh and God's judgment on Pharaoh over his stubborn refusal to heed the message). It reflects the migrant's sense of being torn apart between the memories of the past and the expectations and dread of the future.

Verse 24, however, stops this backward and forward movement. The narrative resumes the sequential progress of the journey from v. 20, which is arrested by the interruption of the divine speech. בדרך "on the way" emphasizes this forward movement. Moses and his family have already left Midian and are on their way. Moses is about to see Aaron whom God said is coming to meet him (4:14). Before they arrive at their destination, however, an incident stops the forward journey. The incident is introduced by במלון, which indicates that it took place at night. Motion and time are suspended as Yahweh meets Moses, and seeks to put him to death. The past and the future fade from sight as full attention is given to the present, to the existential moment when life is threatened.

Time and action move swiftly after this (4:25): Zipporah takes a knife, cuts her son's foreskin, casts it down at someone's feet,<sup>86</sup> and utters to someone: "Surely, you are a bridegroom of blood to me." The attack ceases immediately: "Then he fell away from him" (4:26).

Verse 26 can be read in several ways, and this makes the temporal order uncertain. The determination of the temporal sequence depends on how one reads the adverb אז, and how one construes the relationship

<sup>86</sup> I have opted for the translation: "and threw it at his feet." See p. 203.

between **אמרה חתן** “then he fell away from him” and **דמים למולת** “she said, ‘a bridegroom of blood’ with reference to the circumcisions.”<sup>87</sup> The adverb **אז** before *qatal* verbs (and sometimes before *yiqtol* verbs) in narrative contexts is often used to indicate a temporal sequence, frequently to show a sequence of action or events in the past, “after this, then (**אז**) this happened.”<sup>88</sup> If **אז** is taken this way, then Zipporah would have uttered the phrase **חתן דמים** twice, the first time just after the act of circumcision and before **וירף ממנו**, and the second time after the attack has ceased.<sup>89</sup> This is how the NRSV understands it: “So he let him alone. It was then she said, ‘A bridegroom of blood by circumcision.’” One can also pose a closer connection between the two actions, so that the first one gives rise to the other, in the way that the NJPS translates: “And when he let him alone, she added: ‘A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.’” These translations understand Zipporah’s utterance in v. 26 as occasioned by the action of releasing the one attacked.<sup>90</sup>

Childs suggests that the story ends in v. 26a, so that v. 26b is a comment made by the editor, to refer back to the time when Zipporah uttered the words **חתן דמים**.<sup>91</sup> This seems likely. In several places, **אז** is used to insert an editorial comment to refer to the time (either indefinite or specific) when an earlier action is mentioned.<sup>92</sup> Childs opts for a specific time in the past, that specific occasion when Zipporah uttered the words **חתן דמים**.<sup>93</sup> The phrase then can be translated: “On that occasion, she said **חתן דמים**.” The editorial comment serves to tie Zipporah’s utterance more closely to the rite of circumcision that has just taken place.

<sup>87</sup> See interpretation of **למולת** below p. 207.

<sup>88</sup> Judg 8:3; 13:11; 2 Sam 21:17; 1 Kg 9:24; 1 Chron 15:2; 2 Chron 8:12, 17; 24:17.

<sup>89</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 99.

<sup>90</sup> **אז** can also have a logical rather than a temporal meaning, showing consequence or result, but this is more common in conditional clauses and with *yiqtol* verbs (Gen 24:41; 1 Sam 20:12; 2 Sam 2:27). *Qatal* verbs can also have a logical meaning, but would normally use **כי** with **אז** (Gen 49:4; 2 Sam 5:24, although 2 Kgs 13:19 shows a logical relationship without the use of **כי**). See Childs’s comments (*Exodus*, 99), in which he shows the LXX as assuming a logical sequence.

<sup>91</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 99–100; cf. Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26,” 86.

<sup>92</sup> Gen 4:26; Josh 10:33; 2 Sam 21:18; 2 Kg 14:8 The same function can also be seen with *yiqtol* verbs. See Isaac Rabinowitz, “‘Az Followed by Imperfect Verb-Form in Preterite Contexts: A Redactional Device in Biblical Hebrew,” *VT* 34 (1984): 53–62.

<sup>93</sup> See also Morgenstern, “Bloody Husband,” 68; Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26,” 99–100.

The editorial reference to an earlier time disrupts the temporal sequence of the narrative, although it serves to bring it to a conclusion. It also sets apart the incident in 4:24–26 from the following more straightforward episode, giving the incident the character of an out of the ordinary, mysterious experience.

*More Than Family Goodbyes*

Not only is the section made up of disparate elements, but the ethical expectations raised by certain actions are also subverted and even dashed, especially when read in light of other elements and incidents in the story.

In the first part of Moses' speech to Jethro, **אלכה-נא ואשובה אל-אחי**, **אשר-במצרים** ("may I go back to my kinfolk who are in Egypt"), both verbs are cohortatives, so that stress is laid on the determination underlying the action and the personal investment in it.<sup>94</sup> The speech is an appeal of Moses to Jethro for permission to do something.<sup>95</sup> It can therefore be classified as a directive, with the illocutionary force of a request for permission.<sup>96</sup> The second part of the speech **ואראה העודם חיים** ("so that I may see whether they are still alive") also has a cohortative verb, which expresses Moses' will and purpose for the request. The phrase seeks to bring about a state of affairs through Moses' intention; it thus can be regarded as a commissive. However, Moses' intention can only be fulfilled as far as his request is granted by Jethro. Thus, although it is a commissive, it does not have the strength of a promise or a pledge. It reveals, however, a certain commitment on Moses' part to his kin in Egypt.

As discussed in chap. 2, the action of Moses in asking permission from his father-in-law and his expression of concern for his family in Egypt are considered ethically commendable and appropriate in the world of the First Testament and in my world as a Filipino reader of

<sup>94</sup> GKC § 108a.

<sup>95</sup> Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: UBS, 1999), 91.

<sup>96</sup> A request allows for the possibility of refusal, since it can be granted or refused by the hearer. It is weaker in force than telling or commanding a person to do something, because the one making the request is not in a position of authority or power over the hearer. It also has a weaker emotional force than beseeching or imploring someone to do something. See Searle and Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (see chap. 3, n. 204), 199–201, 204.

the text. This action, however, must be read in the context of other actions and incidents in this story. Read as a whole, the narrative is not focusing on Moses as an ideal family man, but rather on Moses as the chosen messenger called to communicate God's intentions to the Israelites and to Pharaoh. It is therefore odd that shortly after the great expectations raised by the commission episode, Moses would now say goodbye to his father-in-law without any mention of his encounter with Yahweh or of his presumed reason for going back Egypt. Moses' action has troubled some commentators<sup>97</sup> and several excuses have been given why Moses was so secretive, most of them giving a positive twist to Moses' action.<sup>98</sup> On a more negative note, Propp sees the withholding of information as part of a pattern of concealment on Moses' part. According to Propp, Moses may have not admitted to his father-in-law the real reasons why he left Egypt, and probably did not disabuse the first impression he created among Jethro's daughters that he was an Egyptian (2:19).<sup>99</sup> This explanation opens the possibility of a problem of identity in Moses.

Considering the hesitancy of Moses in accepting the task God has assigned to him in the immediately preceding incident, is it possible that Moses' action indicates that his mind is not wholly made up, and that he is still teetering between life in Midian and the decision to return more permanently to Egypt? The speech of Moses to Jethro seems to show that the return to Egypt is a temporary one: "Allow me, please, to go back to my kinfolk in Egypt, so that I may see whether they are still alive" (4:18). Moses intends to visit his kin, not to stay with them permanently.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Hyatt, *Exodus*, 85. Durham (*Exodus*, 55) thinks Moses' action curious, along with Jethro's ready acceptance of the general explanation given by Moses.

<sup>98</sup> Thus, Greenberg (*Understanding Exodus*, 107) thinks that the lack of disclosure exhibits Moses' humility. Along these lines, Childs (*Exodus*, 101–2) observes how medieval commentators interpret Moses' action as a demonstration of modesty. Childs also mentions Calvin who thinks that Moses' reticence points to the difficulty involved in speaking of things pertaining to God. Sarna (*Exodus*, 22) surmises that Jethro might not have given permission if he had known the real reason for Moses' departure, because he would have considered the mission impossible. On the other hand, Lacocque (*Le devenir*, 141) thinks that Jethro was not yet ready to receive the revelation of the divine name. Cassuto (*Exodus*, 52–53) believes that lack of disclosure is necessary in diplomatic negotiations. These explanations, however, seek to find a reason for the omission on the level of the character of the "real" Moses, rather than on the level of the narrative plot.

<sup>99</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 215. So also David Gelernter, "Tziporah's Bloodgroom: A Biblical Breaking Point," *Orim* 3 (Spring 1988): 49; Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "The Bridegroom of Blood: A New Reading," *Judaism* 40 (1991): 327.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:420.

At the same time, the lack of direct speech about Moses' response to God's commission<sup>101</sup> only heightens the ambiguity hinted in 4:18. Has Moses fully accepted the commission or not? Does he first want to see the situation in Egypt and feel his way around, before deciding whether to burn his bridges completely? The ethical value of the family is thus put in a different perspective, in light of the hesitancy of Moses in accepting God's commission. "Seeing the family" then becomes a possible excuse for returning to Egypt as God commanded, yet with the way still open for going back to Midian, if things do not work out. Probably, Moses has not decided whether to leave Midian for good.

Moreover, as mentioned in chap. 2, a Filipino would wonder why it took so long for Moses to initiate to see his family. If Moses was so concerned about what was happening to them, why did he not visit them earlier? He wanted to know whether they were still alive, presumably because he was aware of the constant threat to their lives under Pharaoh. His life also had been under threat; for this reason, he stayed away and lived securely in Midian. Yet it took a major challenge from God before Moses shifted his attention to the threat his people were experiencing in Egypt. It puts into question whether he was really as concerned about his kin, as he had expressed to Jethro.

One other possible explanation is that Moses, while living in Midian, had blocked out the memory of his past life in Egypt, whether as the adopted son of an Egyptian princess or as the biological son of Hebrew parents. Perhaps the complications of being caught between his Hebrew kin and his adoptive Egyptian family had been too much, so that he had tried to forget the suffering of the Israelites caused by the oppression of the Egyptians. Moreover, he may still have been smarting from the pain of being rejected by the people he had sought to help. Thus, the omission of information to Jethro may have been a symptom of Moses' unwillingness to face up to the reality of the Israelites' victimization in Egypt, and to the debt he owes to his people by virtue of their shared heritage and identity.

On the other hand, there are hints of other possibilities. Moses, in traveling back to Egypt, "took the rod of God in his hand" (4:20b), just as God had instructed (4:17), which may indicate an openness to the divine commission.<sup>102</sup> To be sure, this short detail is tucked in almost

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<sup>101</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 76.

<sup>102</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 76.

as an afterthought, after a longer account of the departure of Moses and his family for Egypt (4:20a). Nevertheless, it introduces a certain ambiguity in the above reading. Moses may have concluded, based on his previously failed experiences in trying to help his fellow Hebrews, that he was not the person for the job, and that he did not have the skills or the credibility to do something about their situation. But now, armed with the rod of God, representing God's power, he is less doubtful of a possible negative response. One cannot say, however, that with God's power at his disposal, Moses has become more confident. His self-doubt is evident in the commission episode and recurs again when the oppressive situation turns for the worse after his first address to Pharaoh (5:1–21). He asks God: "Why did you ever send me?" (5:22 NIV), and he reiterates his previous objection of being a poor speaker (6:12, 30). Thus, although Moses may have been willing to go and see the current situation of his kin, and even to make the first steps in carrying out God's commands, he also seems likely to give up and go back to Midian at the first sign of rebuff and trouble.

*The Attacker is the Deity*

The most discordant element in the story, however, is the unexpected attack of the deity (4:24). First of all, the action itself can be considered out of place in a narrative whose focus is the return to Egypt. The forward movement toward a logical and temporal conclusion is impeded, and the intelligibility of the narrative is threatened as the succession of events becomes more difficult to follow. Second, when seen from the perspective of the second narrative unit (2:23–4:31), God's action seems to be out-of-character with the God whose intention is to deliver Israel from the continual threat of Pharaoh's destructive policies. As Childs comments, "One can hardly attribute this behavior to the same God."<sup>103</sup> Third, although Yahweh is presented as an aggressor in Exod 1:1–14:31, the aggression is directed toward Pharaoh and Egypt, but here the aggression is directed toward the would-be deliverer of Israel (if Moses is the one attacked).<sup>104</sup> Fourth, ethical expectations become disoriented as the text ascribes to the deity a deed considered ethically deplorable: attacking a non-aggressive and unsuspecting traveler in a

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<sup>103</sup> Brevard Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Hallenson, 1960), 58.

<sup>104</sup> Kessler, "Psychoanalysis and Ex. 4:24–26," 36–37.



most vulnerable state. Such actions are unacceptable from the perspective of the First Testament world and that of a Filipino reader.

The action is also the opposite of God's speech acts. In the first speech (4:19), God commands Moses to return to Egypt, and follows this with an assertive about the present state of affairs—that the threat to Moses' life no longer exists. However, the assertive's conjunction with the previous imperative gives it another indirect illocutionary point, that of a commissive, with the illocutionary force of an assurance.<sup>105</sup> Yahweh gives a reason why there is no longer any impediment to Moses' going back to Egypt—the ones who wanted to kill him are dead. Indirectly then, God is assuring Moses that he will not be harmed and he need not be afraid. This serves as an encouragement to Moses, who has struggled with his commission.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, the fact that Moses' enemies are dead may mean that the door is now open for Moses to be reintegrated back into the Egyptian fold.

In the second speech (4:21–23), God unfolds what will happen in the future, which presupposes that Moses will appear before Pharaoh to deliver God's menacing message. God issues instructions (4:21a), reveals intentions (4:21b), and announces what will take place: **ואני אחזק את לבו ולא ישלח את העם** ("I, however, will make his heart stubborn, and he will not set the people free" (21c). The announcement shows what God intends to do (commissive) and how Pharaoh will respond (assertive). The first clause, **ואני אחזק את לבו** ("I, however will make his heart stubborn"), has the illocutionary force of a pledge (even though a verb for "pledge" is not present) in that it involves a strong commitment to a future course of action.<sup>107</sup> The second clause, **ולא ישלח את העם** ("and he will not set the people free"), declares a future state of affairs, which results from the commitment stated in the first clause. An indirect illocutionary force may also be present, in that God's pledge and prediction may have been intended to assure Moses that God is still working in spite of Pharaoh's negative response. Yahweh then commands Moses what he is to say to Pharaoh (4:22a). God's message to Pharaoh through Moses asserts God's claim over Israel as God's firstborn (4:22b), commands Pharaoh to release Israel (4:23), and utters a threat, which is also in the form of a declaration of judgment.

<sup>105</sup> The **כי** is an illocutionary connective that introduces an explicative clause that explains the command. See Joüon § 170d, da.

<sup>106</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:422.

<sup>107</sup> Searle and Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*, 194.

All of the above speech acts involve commitment on God's part, and require God's self-involvement. Briggs equates self-involvement in speech acts to the commitment made by a person by virtue of his or her promises and intentions.<sup>108</sup> Yet God's action in attacking the traveler on the way to Egypt is the opposite of the commitment expressed behind the speeches. The action of God in attacking a vulnerable traveler is already ethically unacceptable; more so if the action contradicts stated intentions and assurances. Indeed, God's actions in this episode do not conform to any normal ethical expectations and ideals.

What is the nature of Yahweh's threat? It is clearly a direct attempt to take the life of the traveler. Deborah Sunoo notes how scholars have tried to soften the action by saying that it was not God's intention to make a "direct hit." Fretheim, for example, argues that the phrase "sought to kill him" (ויבקש הימתו) is intended to give a chance for Zipporah to take action, while Lindström tones down the force of the verb המית by claiming that it is more neutral and less violent than the verb הרג.<sup>109</sup> Sunoo shows, however, that the phrase "sought to kill" (בקש with either המית or הרג) always implies a deliberate attempt to put someone to death.<sup>110</sup>

The significance of the assault, however, does not lie only in an attempted execution. The attack, if successful, would have put an end to Moses' mission in Egypt (if the one attacked was Moses), or at least would have curtailed it (if the one involved was the son). Moses, however, is just a messenger tasked by God to communicate to the Israelites and to Pharaoh. So it is actually Yahweh's mission which is imperiled. As Houtman says, "How can it be that YHWH himself demolishes what has been achieved so far with much difficulty?"<sup>111</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Briggs, *Words in Action* (see chap. 3, n. 198), 8.

<sup>109</sup> Deborah Hannay Sunoo, "God Bursts Forth: Unexpected Disruptions in the Narrative Landscape of the Hebrew Bible" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999) 56, citing Fretheim, *Exodus*, 79; and Fredrik Lindström, *God and Origin of Evil* (see chap. 3, n. 31), 44. Cf. Ronald Allen, "'The Bloody Bridegroom' in Exodus 4:24–26," *BSac* 153 (1996): 265.

<sup>110</sup> See Sunoo, "God Bursts Forth," 55–56, esp. n. 75. She cites examples where a form of בקש with המית or הרג or with another phrase, indicates an intent to kill: 1 Kgs 11:40; 1 Sam 19:2; 20:1; 23:15; 2 Sam 16:11; 1 Kgs 19:10, 14; Jer 11:21, 38:16; Est 2:21, 6:2. A closer parallel is Jer 26:21.

<sup>111</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:425.

*The Circumciser is the Woman*

Some have pointed out that a peculiar feature of this tale is that the one who performs the rite of circumcision on a male son is a woman.<sup>112</sup> For Filipinos, to have Zipporah performing the rite is not unusual, since mothers are expected to have a major role in anything that concerns their children, but this may not be the case in the world of the First Testament. Indeed, in the biblical material, with the exception of this passage, the male (the father or an elder) performs the rite of circumcision rather than the female. Abraham is the one tasked to perform the rite (Gen 17:9–14; 23–27; 21:4). Before the entry into Canaan, Joshua was the one who circumcised the Israelites (Josh 5:2–7).<sup>113</sup> However, other passages, which deal with laws regarding circumcision, do not give any explicit provision as to who should perform the rite (Lev 12:3; Exod 12: 44–48). In the gruesome story of Gen 34, when Hamor and his son Shechem agreed to ask the men in their city to be circumcised, there is no mention of who performed the act, only that all the men were circumcised (Gen 34:24).

There are studies that show that some cultures see male circumcision as a male task, since it serves to solidify male intergenerational bonds, while weakening the ties between mother and son.<sup>114</sup> Thus, some male initiation rites include symbolic gestures by which the sons are separated from their mothers.<sup>115</sup> Even in *beena* marriages, in which the husband joins the wife's household,<sup>116</sup> which Morgenstern claims was the practice of the early Semites, it was still the male head of the clan—the wife's oldest brother—who was entrusted with administering the rite to the male children, including his sister's offspring.<sup>117</sup> It was

<sup>112</sup> Walters, "Lodging Place," 408; Houtman, "Exodus 4:24–26," 84; Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 160.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Kumin, "Bridegroom," 9–10.

<sup>114</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 163.

<sup>115</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (trans. Willard R. Task; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 7–10.

<sup>116</sup> In *beena* marriages, kinship is traced through the mother, in contrast to *ba'al* marriage in which kinship is traced through the father. The latter case, in which the wife joins the husband's household, characterized the later Semites. It is more evident in biblical material, although vestiges of the early *beena* marriage survived, according to Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband," 36–38.

<sup>117</sup> Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband," 55–56.

only in emergency cases that the sister—the mother of the child—could act as her brother's substitute.<sup>118</sup>

However, there are also indications that circumcision may not have been an all-male rite from the beginning, so that women were totally excluded from participating and being present. Lawrence Hoffman sees some traces of women's involvement in religious rites in the rabbinic period, particularly in the rite of the redemption of the firstborn. The references are oblique and mentioned only in passing, which is understandable since rabbinic literature tends to suppress references to women's activities as part of the official theology. Nevertheless, the indirect references are still there and give a fuller picture of the actual practice.<sup>119</sup> Early on as well, women participated in the circumcision rites in the synagogue by holding their sons on their laps as they were being circumcised. It was only later that this practice was prohibited because of the objections of some rabbis.<sup>120</sup> Thus, "circumcision has been transformed from a family event with mother, father, and child at the center into a male-only ritual."<sup>121</sup>

In light of this, it seems likely that women were not barred from being present in the circumcision of their sons during the biblical period, and they probably had a role to play in it as well. Mothers were very much involved in the naming of their sons,<sup>122</sup> and in a family affair such as the circumcision of one's son (circumcisions were not yet held in the synagogue, but took place in the home), it is unlikely that mothers did not have some form of involvement.

If this is the case, Zipporah's performance of the rite is unexpected enough to cause a discordance, but not so unimaginable as to be totally out of place. At best, it introduces a certain ambiguity in her role as circumciser. Ackerman argues that Zipporah's assuming the role of circumciser is tied to the liminal character of this passage.<sup>123</sup> Liminal periods are characterized by anti-structure, in which "the social identities

<sup>118</sup> Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband," 67. Morgenstern thinks that such an emergency exists in this passage because Moses was unable to administer the rite.

<sup>119</sup> Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood* (see chap. 3, n. 157), 173–89.

<sup>120</sup> Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 190–207.

<sup>121</sup> Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 207.

<sup>122</sup> See, e.g., Gen 4:25; 19:37, 38; 29:32, 33; 35:18; Judg 13:24; 1 Sam 1:20; 4:21; 1 Chron 7:16.

<sup>123</sup> Ackerman, "Miriam and Zipporah," 71–75. She suggests that by circumcising her son, Zipporah takes the place of her father Jethro, the priest of Midian, in performing a priestly function. Zipporah then is a ritual specialist. Cf. McNutt, "Kenites," 122.

that have previously defined liminal entities dissolve.”<sup>124</sup> The fluidity in status enables someone outside the structure, such as a woman, to hold a position of leadership that would not have been possible if the society has reached a highly structural aggregation stage.<sup>125</sup> Thus, Zipporah is able to have a more direct role in the circumcision of her son because she and her family are in a transitional phase of their lives, in which neither the customs of Israel nor the customs of Midian dictate how things are to be done.

The ambiguous role of Zipporah is reinforced by her being a Midianite.<sup>126</sup> Kunin thinks that the narrative presents an inversion of roles, in that the circumciser’s genealogical background as a non-Israelite is the opposite of normal expectations.<sup>127</sup> Since circumcision is regarded as the sign of the covenant (in Priestly texts), it is therefore odd that someone outside the covenant should be administering the rite. However, it is arguable that the Midianites are not completely outside the Abrahamic covenant, since they are the descendants of Abraham’s wife Keturah (Gen 25:1–4). Presumably, the promise to Abraham of a multitude of nations as his offspring (Gen 17:1–6) applies to them as well. Moreover, the attitude of the First Testament toward the Midianites is complex.<sup>128</sup> On one hand, a favorable view can be seen in that Moses finds refuge in Midian (Exod 2:15), he marries a Midianite wife (Exod 2:21), and has a Midianite father-in-law who blesses and presents offerings to Yahweh (Exod 18:9–12), and provides wise counsel to Moses in leading the Israelites (Exod 18:13–27).<sup>129</sup> Moreover, his Midianite father-in-law (or brother-in-law) helps to guide Israel through the desert (Num 10:29–32). And yet, in other passages the Midianites are portrayed as seeking to curse Israel (Num 22), causing Israel to sin (Num 25), and being antagonists in God’s holy war (Num 31; Judg 7–9).<sup>130</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Ackerman, “Miriam and Zipporah,” 70, drawing from the work of Turner, *Ritual Process*, 100–106.

<sup>125</sup> Ackerman, “Miriam and Zipporah,” 71.

<sup>126</sup> Karen Strand Winslow thinks that the concern of this section is to emphasize the positive contributions of Moses’ Midianite relatives and that the section may have arisen from a period when “foreign” wives were controversial in Israel. See “Framing Zipporah: Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses’ Wife” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2003), 33.

<sup>127</sup> Kunin, “Bridegroom,” 10, 12.

<sup>128</sup> Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, 503.

<sup>129</sup> Winslow (“Framing Zipporah,” 17–18) notes that all the depictions of the Midianites in the book of Exodus are positive in relation to Moses and the Israelites.

<sup>130</sup> McNutt, “Marginal Mediators,” 115; Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, 504; George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man of God* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 55–56.

Paula McNutt, using a ritual approach, proposes that the ambiguous and marginal character of the Midianites puts them in a position to become “marginal mediators.” As such they are able to facilitate the transition of Israel from a position of liminality (the sojourn in Egypt, the wilderness wanderings) to a more structured society in Canaan.<sup>131</sup> If this is so, the ambiguous role of Zipporah puts into prominence the role she plays in being a marginal mediator, facilitating the transition of Moses from being “betwixt and between” to a more settled identity as a messenger of Yahweh and a leader of the Israelites in Egypt. Her role then is crucial in the story.

#### SYNTHESIS OF HETEROGENEOUS PARTICULARS

Although a plot is made up of heterogeneous elements, unexpected incidents and surprises, diverse roles, and temporal disparities, the operation of the plot, according to Ricoeur, also transforms these various elements into a whole, thus producing a concordance out of discordance.<sup>132</sup> The disparity and lack of continuity in Exod 4:18–26 have been attributed to different sources,<sup>133</sup> which are seen to have no direct connection to each other, being linked only by verbal cues, or by references to Moses’ return to Egypt. Yet the resort to sources does not explain how the separate materials have been synthesized into one story, nor does it show the function of the passage in the present narrative context.<sup>134</sup> How does the plot operate to bring a concordance out of these discordant materials?

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<sup>131</sup> McNutt, “Marginal Mediators,” 122–126. She cites the role of the Midianite traders in transporting Joseph to Egypt, and thus setting into motion the migration of Jacob’s family to Egypt, where the transformation from a family unit to a people takes place. Whereas Genesis gives an account of individual family ancestors, the concern in Exodus shifts from a family to an emerging people. (Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 49, 51). Midian gives Moses a refuge when he is fleeing from Egypt, and it is in Midian where Moses is transformed into a liberator. Jethro, a priest of Midian, acts as legal counsel and helps to set up the infrastructure for Israel’s new identity.

<sup>132</sup> See p. 24.

<sup>133</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 191; Hyatt, *Exodus*, 84–85; Auerbach, *Moses*, 45–50.

<sup>134</sup> A number of scholars have emphasized the need to see the function of the text in its context: Oosthuizen, “Some Thoughts,” 5; Childs, *Exodus*, 98; Robinson, “Zipporah to the Rescue,” 449–50; Kaplan, “The Lord Sought,” 65–66. Sarna, *Exodus*, 24, thinks that, in spite of the disparities in the text, there are indications of a careful design.

*Family Matters and Divine Call*

Exodus 4:18–26 is marked by the interweaving of narration and speech. The narration focuses on family scenes of saying goodbye, departing, and traveling—all common events when a family migrates. The speeches—both from the deity—deal with what would and would not happen in Egypt. They are a continuation of the call episode with its instructions, assurances, and intentions. The first speech allays Moses' personal fears while the second speech deals more directly with Moses' mission and looks ahead to what awaits him in Egypt. The structure of this section can be diagrammed in the following way, according to form, content, and characters or interlocutors involved.

- 18     *Narration:* Family scene of saying goodbye. Interlocutors: Moses and father-in-law, both involved in a dialogue.
- 19     *Speech:* Continuation of commission scene with command and assurance. Interlocutors: God and Moses, but with Moses a silent listener.
- 20     *Narration:* Family scene of migration. Characters: Moses, wife and children, with Moses as the main actor, while wife and children are passive participants.
- 21–23 *Speech:* Continuation of commission scene with an announcement of what is forthcoming and instruction about the message Moses is to deliver to Pharaoh. Interlocutors: God and Moses, with Moses again a silent listener.
- 24–26 *Narration:* Encounter between God and family. Characters: God is active, and the one attacked is passive; Zipporah is active, and the son is passive.

One way to look at this structure is to see an interlinking of two separate themes: that of family, and that of vocation. The two themes are kept separate until the last part (vv. 24–26), at which point they converge. But in the beginning, God as an actor does not play a role in the affairs of the family. The commission event is not cited as a factor in the departure of Moses' family for Egypt. In the same way, Moses' family does not play a role in God's commission to Moses, and no mention is made of them in God's speech.

The family theme (4:18, 20) revolves around Moses and his family, which consists of three families: his family of orientation (blood relation), family of procreation (wife and children), and family of affinity by marriage. Under this theme, Moses is the main actor, Jethro his

father-in-law a secondary actor, and Moses' wife and children are the passive recipients of the action. The focus on the family is striking.<sup>135</sup> Moses says goodbye to his family of affinity by marriage (represented by Jethro the patriarch), who adopted him and whom he served for many years. He asks permission to see his family of orientation, his blood kin, which includes his siblings, back in Egypt. In doing so, he takes his family of procreation (his wife Zipporah and their sons) from the family in Midian to the family in Egypt. The word pair **הלך** and **שוב** serves to link the three families together. Moses *went* (**וילך**) and *returned* (**וישב**) to his father-in-law and asked permission to *go* (**אלכה**) and *return* (**אשובה**) to his kin in Egypt. Jethro told him to *go* (**לך**) with his blessing. He then took his wife and sons and *returned* (**וישב**) to Egypt. There is a movement from one family to another, reinforcing the theme of transition. When taken by itself, the event just describes a commonplace occurrence, that of an ordinary family traveling back to the husband's place of birth in order to visit kin and introduce his new family to his siblings and relatives.

The vocation theme (4:19, 21–23) revolves around God and Moses, and the anticipated events in Egypt. God is the main actor, with Moses as the silent recipient of God's speech acts. God's speeches to Moses also have the note of going back, as seen in the repetition of the verbs **הלך** and **שוב** in God's speech. God commands: "Go, return (**לך שב**) to Egypt" (v. 19), and tells Moses what will happen when he goes and returns to Egypt: "As you *go to return* (**לשוב**) to Egypt..." (v. 21). In the first divine speech (v. 19), given while Moses is still in Midian, the command to go back contains an assurance that the threat to Moses' life is gone. In the second divine speech, given while Moses is already on the journey back to Egypt, the Lord expands on what will happen once Moses reaches Egypt: Moses will perform the wonders God has given at his disposal, but God will harden Pharaoh's heart and will not let the people go. A decisive turn would then occur in which God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn.

The two themes show different reasons for Moses' return to Egypt. In the family theme, the reason for the return is private and relational, to see whether his relatives and people are still alive; in the vocation

<sup>135</sup> Robert Clarke Dunston, "The Dark Side of God: The Antagonistic God in the Mosaic Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1983), 79, and Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 116, note the family motif.



theme, the reason for the return is social and political. The two themes also portray Moses in contrasting ways. In the family theme, Moses is the one taking the initiative, setting into motion the family's return to Egypt, and taking charge of the actual departure. In the vocation theme, Moses is completely passive and silent. Whereas in the commissioning event at the mountain, Moses was very vocal with his objections, here he does not speak at all. One could interpret Moses' silence as a sign of acquiescence and a total acceptance of God's commission but as discussed above, the fact that Moses hid from his father-in-law the reason behind his departure suggests that Moses' intentions are more complex than he stated.<sup>136</sup>

God's speeches to Moses (4:19) reveal something of Moses' internal strife. The first speech implies that Moses is fearful that he would be harmed once he goes back to Egypt. God's second speech (4:21–23) can also be read as one designed indirectly to allay Moses' fears, this time not because of the old Pharaoh who is already dead, but because of the new Pharaoh who also could kill him. First, God lays out in detail what will happen, including the refusal of Pharaoh to let the people go—so that Moses will not be surprised by the turn of events. God also reminds Moses to consider the wonders that God has given him the power to do (4:21a). Moses is then commanded to perform these wonders before Pharaoh. Since Moses has God's powers at his disposal, he is not defenseless. Lastly, he is told that God will eventually judge Pharaoh through the death of Pharaoh's firstborn. Thus, Pharaoh will not have the last word, for the power of life and death is in God's hands. God's speech implicitly communicates the message that there is nothing to fear but God.

The separation of the family and vocation theme suggests a similar tension in Moses, whose family concerns and vocation seem to be kept apart. These two disparate elements are represented by what Moses took with him to Egypt: he took (וִיקַח) his wife and children with him and he took (וִיקַח) the rod of God in his hand (4:20).<sup>137</sup> The temporal dislocation highlights this tension further. Even as Moses seems to be in a hurry to visit his family, God lags behind—still commanding Moses to go back, still giving an assurance, still giving instructions, and revealing to Moses what would take place in his encounter with

<sup>136</sup> See p. 201.

<sup>137</sup> Lacocque, *Devenir de Dieu*, 144.

Pharaoh. God's repeated command, assurances, and instructions seem to indicate that the old issues are far from over, and that Moses is still not in a good place to be God's messenger to the Israelites, hence the need for reiteration on God's part. Moses' eagerness to take his family to his place of birth is not matched with an equal eagerness to do what God wants, or to save his kinfolk from their misery. Perhaps Moses is regretting the act of youthful brashness in intervening in the affairs of the Egyptians and Hebrews, which nearly cost him his life. Perhaps, as was suggested earlier, Moses has forgotten his own Israelite identity and the debt he owes to his suffering kin in Egypt, and the process of remembrance is taking its time.

One possibility is that Moses' family may be more important to him than God's commission. Indeed, the separation of both themes reinforces this position and may reflect Moses' point of view. Moses may have not integrated these two aspects of his life—family life and God's call. They remain compartmentalized in his thinking. He does not realize that one commitment affects the other. In the first place, during his sojourn in Midian, Moses did not feel any need to leave the household of his father-in-law. While Moses laments his being a גר, the text says that ויואל משה לשבת את-האיש “Moses was content to dwell with the man” (2:21 ESV). In passages in which the verb יאל is used in connection with ישב, the sense is that of intending to stay for good, of persisting to stay.<sup>138</sup> In other passages, the verb means “to be willing, to be pleased, to be keen.”<sup>139</sup> The verb can also have a stronger sense of “being resolved, determined.”<sup>140</sup> Thus, Moses' action in staying with the household of Jethro is not just mere passive consent, but shows that “he was delighted and actively resolved to settle there.”<sup>141</sup>

<sup>138</sup> The closest parallel is Judg 17:11 in which Micah invites a Levite to live with him and become his priest. The Levite was willing to do so ויואל לשבת את-האיש and he became a member of the household, treating Micah as his own son. The combination יאל + ישב (inf) is also used to describe the inhabitants of Canaan who cannot be dislodged by the Israelites because they persisted and were determined to live (ויואל לשבת) in the land (Josh 17:12; Judg 1:27; Judg 1:35). Cf. Josh 7:7, but this time in reference to the people of Israel.

<sup>139</sup> Judg 19:6; 1 Sam 12:22; 2 Sam 7:29; 2 Kgs 5:23; 2 Kgs 6:3; Job 6:9, 28.

<sup>140</sup> Deut 1:5; Hos 5:11.

<sup>141</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 67, n. 82. Reis (“New Reading,” 326) observes that the verb is never used of other biblical characters like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and his family, etc., who have also gone to dwell in a foreign land. She thinks that the use of this verb gives Moses' decision “an air of calculation,” in that his reason for staying in Midian has to do with social position rather than with love for a woman. She supports this by pointing out that Moses was willing to stay with “the man,” instead of the woman. I

One can surmise from this that Moses has no intention of going back to Egypt. He “has grown entirely at home in Midian and is content to see out his days as shepherd and family man.”<sup>142</sup> The repetition of the phrase, “Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses” (3:1; 4:18), stresses Moses’ marriage relationship with a Midianite household. “They are now his kinfolk. He has a formal alliance with them, sealed by marriage.”<sup>143</sup> Hence, God’s command would seem to Moses an intrusion to his settled, placid, contented family life.<sup>144</sup>

Nevertheless, there are also indications that Moses is not totally opposed to God’s calling or insensitive to the sufferings of the Israelites in Egypt. The text is careful to note that Moses took the rod of God with him, which is what God commanded him to do (4:17). This suggests that Moses anticipates that the rod might be used in the future. Moses’ mention of “my brothers” (אֶחָיו) in Egypt (4:18) is also ambiguous. On one hand, it can refer just to Moses’ biological siblings and immediate relatives. On the other hand, it may have an extended sense, referring to his fellow Israelites, which is the sense of אֶחָיו in 2:11.<sup>145</sup> This may indicate that God’s reminders about Moses’ past is having an effect, and that Moses is now feeling the stirrings of his old identification with his fellow Israelites’ plight in Egypt, as when he tried to intervene in their affairs just before fleeing to Midian (2:11–14).

Although the family theme and vocation theme are kept separate in the first part of the narrative, there is a hint of a link between the two themes in the references to the rod of God and to the firstborn.<sup>146</sup> Along with his family, Moses took the rod of God to Egypt (4:20). In God’s message to Pharaoh through Moses (4:22–23), God calls Israel

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think she overrates the use of the phrase “the man.” It reflects a modernistic romantic reading, which forgets that marriages at that time were arranged with the head of the household, and that the invitation of the head of the household (in this case, Jethro) was necessary for Moses to be able to stay. Moses became part of the household of Jethro, and Zipporah was given to him, by virtue of the fact that he had become part of the household.

<sup>142</sup> Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, 310; Cf. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 221.

<sup>143</sup> J. Daniel Hays, “Moses: The Private Man Behind the Public Leader,” *BR* 16, 4 (2000): 21.

<sup>144</sup> David Gunn describes Midian as a rural idyll for Moses, sheltered from “the ‘real world’ of masters and slaves. See “The ‘Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart’: Plot, Character, and Theology in Exodus 1–14,” in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (ed. David Clines et al.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 89.

<sup>145</sup> See chap. 3, n. 14.

<sup>146</sup> Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 116.

firstborn and threatens Pharaoh's firstborn with death. This reiterates the family motif, but this time it is expressed not in terms of the whole clan or family unit, but in terms of the relationship of father and firstborn son.

In the First Testament, the firstborn is described in four passages as **ראשית און** (Gen 49:3; Deut 21:17; Ps 78:51; Ps 105:36), variously translated as "the first fruits of vigor", "the beginning of strength," "the first fruit of manhood," "the first issue of virility." The phrase refers specifically to sexual potency and procreative powers.<sup>147</sup> The firstborn is the proof of the father's virility and ability to reproduce, as well as a token of future offspring.<sup>148</sup> Thus, the symbolic significance of the idea of firstborn is closely related to the importance given to fertility.

The privilege and preference given to the firstborn underscore the value given to lineage, family continuity, and fertility. The right of succession is given to the firstborn. He becomes the head of the family household (**בת אב**) when the father dies, and is the person responsible for the continuance and welfare of all the members.<sup>149</sup> Thus, he is given a double portion (Deut 21:15–17) to help him bear not only the extra economic responsibilities, but also the religious and social roles accorded the head of the family.<sup>150</sup> The firstborn is also first in the genealogical lists, even though all the sons may be named, for it is through the firstborn that the family line is traced.

Israel as God's firstborn means that Israel is a valued son and heir, and the precursor of other children who will also be adopted into God's family. Thus, "Pharaoh's oppression is serious business" since it threatens Yahweh's beloved heir.<sup>151</sup>

The relationship between God and Israel as the firstborn is paralleled by the relationship between Pharaoh and his firstborn. If Pharaoh would

<sup>147</sup> Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50* (see chap. 3, n. 150), 467, n. 11; Sarna, *Genesis*, 333.

<sup>148</sup> Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: JPS, 1996), 196. The meaning of **ראשית** "beginning," or "firstfruits" holds the promise of the fruit which is to come. In Gen 49:3, the phrase **ראשית און** is in parallel with **כח**, which is also used in relation to the strength of the field to yield its produce (Gen 4:12; Job 31:38–39). The word for firstborn itself, **בכור**, is derived from a root that has to do with birth and fruitfulness (**בכר** in the *piel* means "to bear new fruit" and in the *hiphil* "to bear a first child"). See M. Tsevat, "**בכור**," *TDOT* 2:121–22.

<sup>149</sup> V. H. Koov, "Firstborn," *IDB* 2:271. These responsibilities include managing the family estate, providing for survivors, bearing the costs of burying the parents, etc.

<sup>150</sup> I. Mendelsohn, "On the Preferential Status of the Eldest Son," *BASOR* 156 (1959): 40.

<sup>151</sup> Brueggemann, "Exodus," 717–18.

not set God's firstborn free, God would kill Pharaoh's firstborn. In both cases, the son and the father are identified with each other. The plight of God's firstborn, Israel, is God's concern; the death of Pharaoh's firstborn is Pharaoh's punishment. Because Pharaoh is threatening God's family, God will also threaten Pharaoh's family. Thus, "the great political issue of Exodus is given familial intensity."<sup>152</sup>

The themes of family and vocation converge in 4:24–26 as God encounters Moses' family on their way back to Egypt and the family encounters the God who commissioned Moses. Yet God is no longer the liberator, but the slayer. Instead of encouraging the family, God blocks the way and endangers the longed-for family reunion (Moses' agenda) and the hoped-for deliverance (God's agenda in response to Israel's cry).

The lack of clear antecedent as to who is the object of Yahweh's attack has occasioned a great deal of discussion. Most simply take Moses as the most logical person to be attacked.<sup>153</sup> On the other hand, the mention of the firstborn in the immediately preceding paragraph (vv. 21–23) seems to indicate to some that it is Gershom, as the firstborn son of Moses, who is being threatened.<sup>154</sup> No consensus has been reached on this issue. It seems odd indeed that, after carefully mentioning by

<sup>152</sup> Brueggemann, "Exodus," 720.

<sup>153</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 98, thinks that Moses is the most probable person to be attacked because the son is only mentioned afterwards, although he acknowledges that this is not clear. Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 58. Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:447; Propp, "Bloody Bridegroom," 498–99; Otto Kaiser, "*Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*: Three Difficult Narratives in the Pentateuch," in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 82; Ruth and Erhard Blum, "Zippora und ihr חתן דמים," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte; festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Erhard Blum et al.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 43.

<sup>154</sup> Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 113–14, 116; Sarna, *Exodus*, 25; Lindström, *Origin of Evil*, 47–48; Lawrence H. Fink, "The Incident at the Lodging House," *JBQ* 21 (1993): 240–41; Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," 451. Robinson thinks that just as Pharaoh's son is to be punished for maltreating God's firstborn, Gershom is also punished for the sins of his father Moses because of Moses' hesitancy in serving Yahweh. The text, however, does not explicitly state which son is meant, a curious omission if the text wants to highlight the connection of Moses' firstborn to Pharaoh's and Yahweh's firstborn. Others who take the child as the one attacked (without necessarily referring to Gershom) are: Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband," 66–67; Kosmala, "Bloody Husband," 16; Walter Beltz, "Religionsgeschichtliche Marginalie zu Ex 4:24–26," *ZAW* 87 (1975): 209–11.

name the different characters in the preceding and following episodes, personal names are omitted and kept ambiguous in this episode.<sup>155</sup>

Kaplan suggests that the ambiguity is in principle irresolvable.<sup>156</sup> The text can be read both ways, depending on whether one reads vv. 24–26 with the first unit (vv. 18–20) or with the second unit (vv. 21–23). When read with vv. 21–23, the killing of Pharaoh's firstborn is anticipated in the killing of Moses' firstborn and shows that the killing can be applied indiscriminately, in the same way that the Israelites are indistinguishable from the Egyptians as the target of the plague without the blood on their doors. However, when one reads the text with vv. 18–20, the opposite direction is indicated, that Moses is the one attacked. Moses returns to Egypt because the Pharaoh who was threatening his life is dead (4:19; cf. 2:15). Yet on the way back, God is now the one threatening his life (4:24).<sup>157</sup>

Reaching the same conclusion, Walters thinks that the text is meant to be read with two different interpretations, one in which the object of the attack is Moses for being afraid of Pharaoh, the other in which the object is Moses' son, to force Moses to identify his son as an Israelite and not an Egyptian.<sup>158</sup> Kunin also thinks that the text allows for Moses and his son as the figure of transformation. Whereas the son is tied to the act of circumcision, Moses is tied to the murder. Thus, the ambiguity allows the text to refer to two generations at the same time.<sup>159</sup>

Earlier, I have linked this ambiguity with a liminal situation. The narrative's shift to anonymous and ambiguous identities signals that a transition event is taking place and that the character or characters of the story are on the threshold of a new phase in life.<sup>160</sup> One function of anonymity is to indicate the effacement of identity.<sup>161</sup> The obliteration of identity makes the formation of a new identity possible.

Another function of anonymity is the blurring or merging of identities between the characters in the story.<sup>162</sup> The ambiguity and lack of

<sup>155</sup> Kosmala, "Bloody Husband," 19.

<sup>156</sup> Kaplan, "The Lord Sought," 70–71. Cf. Sunoo, "God Bursts Forth," 37; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 78.

<sup>157</sup> Kaplan, "The Lord Sought," 68–70.

<sup>158</sup> Walters, "Lodging Place," 418–23.

<sup>159</sup> Kunin, "Bridegroom," 4–5, 9.

<sup>160</sup> See pp. 166–67.

<sup>161</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Why Ask My Name?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5–9.

<sup>162</sup> Reinhartz, *Name*, 12–13, 144–53.

clear antecedent shows the convergence of the identities of father and son, and thus highlights the solidarity between them.<sup>163</sup> It becomes immaterial who is the object of attack, for the son is identified with the father, and the father with the son. This bond between father and son acts as a counterpart to the identification of God with firstborn son Israel and of Pharaoh with his firstborn. "Just as God and Pharaoh are involved with their 'sons' so is Moses with his."<sup>164</sup>

Since the male members of the family are the bearers of the line, the continuity of the whole family is threatened as well. The bond between Moses and his son shows that it is the intergenerational tie that is put at risk. Thus, Yahweh's attack not only threatens the traveler and the mission in Egypt, but also imperils Moses' family and the continuity of his line.

The ambiguity then in the antecedent highlights the danger posed to the whole family. Since it is the whole family that is threatened, it is significant and appropriate that it is Zipporah, the wife, the mother, who undertakes the decisive act that averts the threat. Zipporah, Moses' wife, cuts the foreskin of her son, and in doing so, involves herself in this mysterious encounter in the night. God stops the whole family from going back to Egypt in mid-course, but the mother's action moves them forward.

### *The Threat of Death*

Yahweh's action in threatening the continuity of a family line brings to mind the action of the king of Egypt in the first narrative unit (1:1–2:22). The opening chapters show the Israelites multiplying rapidly and filling the Egyptian land with non-Egyptians (1:7). Their fertility threatened the new king, for the Israelites' continued increase could

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<sup>163</sup> Peter Lockwood also thinks that the author leaves open the question of who is attacked in order to include both Moses and Gershom. He says: "Moses and Gershom represent two generations, and both the head of the people and the people as a whole." It seems indeed that two generations are being called to mind in the attack, although the text does not specifically name Gershom, for it is immaterial whether the older or younger son is meant; two generations are still represented. Lockwood thinks that Moses represents the people in the sense that his experience foreshadows Israel's near-death experience in the later episode of the killing of the firstborn sons, and that Moses absorbs the first wave of attack from a hostile God. He does not make clear, however, why it was necessary for Moses to undergo such a terrifying experience. See "Zipporah in the Account of Exodus: Literary and Theological Perspectives on Exodus 4:24–26," *LTJ* 35 (2001): 121.

<sup>164</sup> Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 116.

result in a power base that could help topple the kingdom. Because of the booming Israelite population, the king became mindful that the Israelites were not native to Egypt, and therefore could not be expected to be loyal during times of military or political crisis.<sup>165</sup> Thus, the king decided to cut the privileges enjoyed by the Israelites; henceforth, they were to be treated as slaves.

New policies were enforced to ensure that the continued biological growth of the Israelites would be checked, if not stopped altogether (1:9–10).<sup>166</sup> First, the Egyptians subjected the men to harsh labor, but the long hours and brutal conditions at work did not affect their sexual potency, for the Israelites multiplied as much as ever (1:11–12). A more direct approach was needed. Thus, the midwives were instructed to kill all the male babies (1:15–16). This too did not work, for the midwives spared the boys, out of fear for God (1:17). Finally, Pharaoh enlisted the help of all his people, and commanded them to throw all the Hebrew male children into the Nile (1:22). Ironically, however, it was a member of his household who was instrumental in saving the very person who would be appointed by God to ensure Israel's continuity and fertility (2:5–10).<sup>167</sup> Yet all the actions of the Pharaoh had only one aim: to reduce the fertility of the Israelites, and by systematic ethnic cleansing, to bring about their decline.<sup>168</sup> The killing of the boys rather than the girls ensured this. Women could be assimilated into Egyptian households as slave concubines; their children then would belong to their Egyptian masters, and they would have an Egyptian identity. The men, however, could not be assimilated in the same way and their children by their Hebrew wives and concubines would still belong to an Israelite household and retain their Israelite identity.<sup>169</sup>

But the threat of death not only hung over the whole people of Israel. Later, Pharaoh also sought to kill Moses (2:15). By his anti-Egyptian action (killing an Egyptian master for mistreating a Hebrew slave), Moses

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<sup>165</sup> Greifenhagen (*Egypt*, 51–52) shows that the objections of the king of Egypt come from a framework of ethnic differentiation. The polarity between Israel and Egypt can be seen in the king's speech, which Greifenhagen translates: "Look, the people of the sons of Israel are more numerous and powerful than *we*. Come, let *us* deal shrewdly with *them*..." (Exod 1:9–10a).

<sup>166</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 5; Brueggemann, "Exodus," 694–95.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 61.

<sup>168</sup> Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 20.

<sup>169</sup> Assimilation could happen by adoption, and possibly the freedom by which Pharaoh's daughter was able to adopt a Hebrew child suggests that this practice was allowed since the child's identity would be Egyptian.



had identified himself with the slaves, rather than their masters. Hence, the threat of death that previously had applied only to the Hebrews was extended to Moses. In Pharaoh's eyes, Moses was no longer "one of us"—an Egyptian—but "one of them"—a Hebrew—and therefore subject to the same death sentence.

The action of Yahweh in threatening not only the life of Moses, but also the fertility and continuity of Moses' family, is curiously similar to the action of Pharaoh toward the Israelites and toward Moses. Verbal links tie together the death threats of Pharaoh and the death threat of Yahweh. Pharaoh commands the midwives: **אם-בן הוא והמתן אתו** "If he is a boy, put him to death" (1:16). Pharaoh seeks to kill Moses (**ויבקש להרג את-משה**; 2:15). God assures Moses that those seeking his life (**המבקשים את-נפשו**) are dead, but in the next scene, God seeks to kill Moses (**ויבקש המיתו**). The repetition of **המית**, **בקש**, **הרג** underscores the similarities in the actions of Yahweh and Pharaoh.<sup>170</sup> As Oosthuizen puts it, God has the same murderous intentions as Pharaoh.<sup>171</sup> However, not only are Yahweh and Pharaoh identified with each other in being the subject of attempts to kill; Moses and Pharaoh are also identified with each other in that they, through their families, are the objects of Yahweh's intention to kill. In a speech to Moses, God announces that he intends to kill Pharaoh's firstborn (**בכרך אנכי הרג את-בנך**, 4:23); however the next scene shows God attacking Moses and his family instead (4:24). God acts like Pharaoh, and Moses is treated like Pharaoh. There is indeed, as Kaplan says, a confusion of identities in this passage.<sup>172</sup>

Why is Yahweh acting like Pharaoh and why is Moses being treated like Pharaoh? There are several possibilities. Oosthuizen, whose position is that Yahweh's attack is provoked by Moses' recalcitrance, thinks that the issue revolves around sovereignty. Moses' fear of Pharaoh shows the extent of Pharaoh's control over him, while Moses' hesitance to accept the commission shows an unwillingness to recognize God's claims over him.<sup>173</sup> In refusing to accede to God's demands, Moses is in fact acting

<sup>170</sup> Kaplan ("The Lord Sought," 69–70) notes the repetition of the word **בקש** in 2:15, 4:19, and 4:24. The first two refers to Pharaoh, the last to Yahweh. According to Kaplan, it only in these three verses that **בקש** is used in connection with killing. Cf. Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," 451; Römer, "De l'Archaïque au Subversif," 3.

<sup>171</sup> Oosthuizen, "Some Thoughts," 17, 23.

<sup>172</sup> Kaplan, "The Lord Sought," 68–69, 71.

<sup>173</sup> Oosthuizen, "Some Thoughts," 18–21.

like Pharaoh in not recognizing God, and thus is treated like Pharaoh. The attack is meant to stress this point.<sup>174</sup>

Greifenhagen, on the other hand, thinks that the issue is one of identity. Moses has an ambiguous identity, being a hybrid Egyptian-Israelite.<sup>175</sup> The confusion of identities in this passage may reflect Moses' confusion about his own identity. The juxtaposition of the killing of Pharaoh's firstborn and the killing of Moses suggests a metonymic identification between the two, and implies that Moses' self-identity is still primarily Egyptian. The nocturnal attack purges the Egyptian aspects of Moses, and paves the way through the rite of circumcision for a change in identity to take place.<sup>176</sup>

On the other hand, Kaplan believes that the function of the confusion in identities is not related at all to any attitude or perspective of Moses. Rather, it serves to underscore the "moral opaqueness, the non-rational quality and mysterious atmosphere of the incident as a whole."<sup>177</sup> This serves to show "that the clear religious order prevailing previously has mysteriously broken down for no apparent reason."<sup>178</sup>

I believe it is possible to bring the above views together if the attack is seen as part of a liminal experience, as argued above.<sup>179</sup> A liminal experience is characterized by anti-structure. "Here the cognitive schema that give sense and order to everyday life no longer apply but are, as it were, suspended—in ritual symbolism perhaps even shown as destroyed or dissolved."<sup>180</sup> Thus, the breakdown in clear religious and moral structures, which Kaplan observes, is but an expression of this liminal experience. Because of this structural breakdown, "there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence."<sup>181</sup>

Nevertheless, at the heart of the liminal experience is the communication of the *sacra*, in which the ones to be initiated are introduced to alternative ways and possibilities, even as they are divested of previous ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. This knowledge leads to a change

<sup>174</sup> Oosthuizen, "Some Thoughts," 23.

<sup>175</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 79.

<sup>176</sup> Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 84. See particularly, n. 145, 146.

<sup>177</sup> Kaplan, "The Lord Sought," 71.

<sup>178</sup> Kaplan, "The Lord Sought," 72.

<sup>179</sup> See pp. 165–68.

<sup>180</sup> Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories About Them," in Mitchell, *On Narrative* (see chap. 3, n. 50), 161.

<sup>181</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 106.

in being, which prepares them for the new stage or task ahead.<sup>182</sup> The encounter of Moses with Yahweh in a death-threatening experience points to different levels of disclosure. First, it discloses certain things about who God is, and how God can act (the issue of sovereignty). “It is part of the basic character of this God that he claims the entirety of the one he has chosen; he takes complete possession of the one to whom he addresses himself.”<sup>183</sup> At the same time, “Yahweh can kill.”<sup>184</sup> In Exodus, the sovereignty of Yahweh is contrasted with the claims of sovereignty by Pharaoh. Moses needs to know whom to fear—Yahweh not Pharaoh—in the same way that Israel needs to know that the one to be feared is Yahweh and not Pharaoh.<sup>185</sup>

A liminal experience, however, does not only give the initiate a glimpse of the character and ways of the deity; it can also reveal something about the initiate's identity. Moses himself has a hybrid identity.<sup>186</sup> Born a Hebrew, raised up as an Egyptian, married to a Midianite, he regards the Hebrews as his brothers, yet dresses as an Egyptian, and is content to settle in Midian. And if the father is confused about his identity, then the sons are likely to end up confused as well. Naming the son Gershom does not only speak of the father's experience, but also articulates the situation of the son.

Pamela Reis thinks that Moses is actually undergoing an identity crisis. The attack is a challenge to “Moses' *persona*. He can no longer be who he thinks he is or who he wishes he were; he has to recognize and become who he truly is.”<sup>187</sup> To be treated as an enemy by Yahweh, in the same way that Yahweh is going to treat Pharaoh and the Egyptians, is a terrifying experience that pushes one to define one's identity in relation to Yahweh.

The issue of identity ties in as well with another important theme in Exodus, that of the distinctiveness of Israel over against Egypt. Through signs and wonders, God creates a distinction (הפלה) between Israel and

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<sup>182</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 102–8.

<sup>183</sup> Buber, *Moses*, 57.

<sup>184</sup> Pixley, *Exodus*, 29.

<sup>185</sup> Isbell, “Exodus 1–2,” 46. She contrasts the fear of the Israelites as they saw the Egyptian army catching up with them (14:10) with their fear of Yahweh when they saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore (14:30–31).

<sup>186</sup> Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 30.

<sup>187</sup> Reis, “New Reading,” 325. For Reis, Yahweh's attack is a figurative expression showing that Moses has been overcome with a suicidal depression.

Egypt. Whereas the people, land, and livestock of Egypt experience the full brunt of the pestilence which God visits upon them, the land of Goshen, where the Israelites live, and their livestock, are spared (Exod 8:23; 9:4, 26; 10:23). The distinction theme culminates in the killing of the firstborn, in which all the firstborn of the Egyptians—whether people or animals—die, while all the firstborn of the Israelites are saved (Exod 11:4–7; 12:26–27) through the blood smeared on their doorposts.<sup>188</sup> Because of the grave consequences resulting from being identified as an Egyptian, it is important for Moses to resolve the issue of his own identity and to identify himself as an Israelite.

However, the issue of Moses' identity is tied to his memory. Moses in Midian had bracketed out the distressing situation in Egypt, perhaps out of a sense of powerlessness to alleviate his people's plight, or out of a feeling of rejection from both Israelites and Egyptians, or out of the need to cut back ties from the past so that he could go on with his new life in Midian. Because of this, he might have forgotten his own links with the God of his ancestors, who had promised to bless the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Hence, God's first words to Moses at the encounter at the mountain were intended to bring Moses into remembrance of God's special relationship to his ancestors, as well as to him and to all the Israelites in Egypt as the bearers of the promises of a national future. God reminded him that, despite his Egyptian upbringing and marriage to a Midianite family, Moses was foremost an Israelite.

By emphasizing the links between Moses, the Israelites, and the ancestors of Israel, God was showing Moses that he owed a debt to the ancestors who had gone before him and to the Israelites in Egypt who were experiencing oppression. Thus, he was being called to exercise the "duty of memory" which was "to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self,"<sup>189</sup> particularly to the victims of injustice.<sup>190</sup> Moses, however, was resistant, indicating that he had not done the work of remembrance and had not fully acknowledged his attachment to the past, present, and future of Israel.

Yahweh's encounter paved the way for the unblocking of Moses' memory through a death threat that would mean the effacement of

<sup>188</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 157.

<sup>189</sup> Ricoeur, *MHF* (see chap. 2, n. 317), 89.

<sup>190</sup> See pp. 64–66.

all traces of the past, the struggles of the present, and the promises of the future. The menace of the obliteration of memory, attention, and anticipation, to use Augustine's language, finally acts a means for Moses to realize the implications of severing ties with the past and not acknowledging the continuity of the family line.

Moreover, the threat of death to Moses' family reveals the extent to which God as a father will act for the sake of firstborn Israel. God would kill in order to protect his own family. Thus, the attack may have brought Moses to an appreciation of the depth of Yahweh's commitment to Israel. With his own family and the continuity of his line under threat, he may have understood better why God is commissioning him to rescue Israel's families from Pharaoh's death threat and to take them to the land that God had promised to their ancestors.

Nevertheless, the thrust of the whole narrative unit (2:23–4:31)<sup>191</sup> shows that Moses' liminal experience and the resulting illumination and formation of his identity is inextricably linked to Moses' task of communicating God's message to the Israelites. The focus of the narrative is not the resolution of Moses' struggles with his personal identity, but of God forging a new identity for Moses so that he can effectively fulfill God's missional mandate.<sup>192</sup> Although Moses entered a marginal existence in Midian because of a life-threatening situation, it is God who transforms this marginality into liminality. By calling Moses back to Egypt, God makes the sojourn in Midian a transitional period rather than a terminal point in Moses' journey. God also initiates a more intense liminal experience for Moses on the way back to Egypt. This paves the way for a new identity to emerge, which would enable Moses to carry out his role as God's messenger. Thus, "it is a marginality that has moved to liminality that becomes productive missionally."<sup>193</sup>

### *Convergence of Symbolic Rites*

Three symbolic rites, belonging broadly to rites of passage and pertaining specifically to initiation rites, are woven together in vv. 24–26. The first one, liminality, is one phase of a rite of passage (the transition phase) and is expressed in the movement of the whole episode. The second rite, circumcision, concludes the period of liminality and also

<sup>191</sup> See pp. 152–60.

<sup>192</sup> I owe these ideas to Charles Ringma, written comments.

<sup>193</sup> Charles Ringma, personal communication.

incorporates within one act the phases of separation and incorporation. The third rite, marriage, which is invoked in the culmination of the act of circumcision, emphasizes the incorporation part of an initiation rite. These rites pertain to processes and symbols that have transformational themes.

*Initiation and Liminality (Moses)*

Initiation rites mark the entrance of a person into a new stage in life, a new group, or a new vocation.<sup>194</sup> In doing so, the person goes through rites which symbolize separation from his or her former life—often conceived in terms of death—and incorporation into a new phase of life—often represented in terms of birth or rebirth. Whereas initiation rites focus on the whole process of separation-transition-incorporation, liminal rites focus only on the transition stage.

Eliade enumerates three broad categories of initiation rites. The first involves rituals that effect the transition from childhood to adulthood (puberty rites, whether biological puberty or social puberty). The second category pertains to entering secret societies. The third is being initiated into a sacred vocation (such as a prophet or a shaman), in which the initiated is accorded a higher religious status and also is expected to have more intense religious experiences.<sup>195</sup> Of these three broad categories, Moses' experience belongs to the last two, while his son evokes the first. On one hand, Moses is being initiated into the Israelite community in Egypt. On the other hand, he is also entering a sacred vocation. The intertwining themes of family and vocation serve to highlight these two aspects of Moses' initiation. The three phases of a rite of passage can be seen in both themes.

In the vocation theme, the call episode itself (3:1–4:17) can be considered a rite of separation since it seeks to redirect Moses' vocation from a shepherd to a prophet of Yahweh. The rite of transition is the journey back to Egypt (4:18–26), while the rite of incorporation is shown in Israel's acceptance of Moses and his message (4:31). Within the structure of the vocation theme is the family theme. In the family theme, as discussed above,<sup>196</sup> separation is evident in the goodbye scene (4:18), transition in the journey back to Egypt (4:20, 24–26), and

<sup>194</sup> Eliade, *Symbols of Initiation*, 2–3.

<sup>195</sup> Eliade, *Symbols of Initiation*, 2–3.

<sup>196</sup> See p. 188.

incorporation in the welcome kiss (4:27). Thus, the transition phase of the family theme and that of the vocation theme coincide, of which Exod 4:24–26 acts as the culminating point. The incident then in vv. 24–26 is the pivotal point in the initiation of Moses to his community and to his sacred vocation.

Metaphors associated with liminality speak of death, dissolution, or decomposition.<sup>197</sup> This is not surprising since the liminal subject is undergoing death, so to speak, by the act of separation from a previous state of existence.<sup>198</sup> However, metaphors of liminality also speak of gestation and parturition,<sup>199</sup> since the detachment from the old system and the passing into a new state or position can also be seen as rebirth or growth.<sup>200</sup> “The essential feature of these symbolizations is that the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories.”<sup>201</sup>

Eliade describes how a recurring motif in initiatory rites is that of darkness and death in the hands of divinity. Novices are told that the deity is going to kill them. This emphasizes both the nature of initiation as a form of death to the profane and an entrance into the sacred.<sup>202</sup> Eliade expounds:

Passing from the profane to the sacred world in some sort implies the experience of death; he who makes the passage dies to one life in order to gain access to another. . . . [T]he novice dies to . . . a profane existence—in order to gain access to a higher life, the life where participation in the sacred becomes possible.<sup>203</sup>

Thus, when seen in the context of an initiation rite, Yahweh’s attack is part of a whole symbolic network, where such action plays a part in the transition to a new stage of existence. The assault is not a punishment

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<sup>197</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95. Other metaphors include being in darkness, or are connected to the wilderness, to the womb, to invisibility, or to an eclipse.

<sup>198</sup> Victor Turner, “The Death and the Dead in the Pilgrimage Process,” in *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religions* (ed. Frank Reynolds and Earle Waugh; University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 24; *Forest of Symbols*, 96.

<sup>199</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 96.

<sup>200</sup> Turner, *Death and the Dead*, 26.

<sup>201</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 97.

<sup>202</sup> Eliade, *Symbols of Initiation*, 9. See also Roger Grainger, *The Language of the Rite* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 112–13.

<sup>203</sup> Eliade, *Symbols of Initiation*, 9–10.

for any remission or disobedience on Moses' part, nor is it an inexplicable expression of "demonism" on Yahweh's part. Rather, the attack forms an intrinsic element of this particular rite of initiation, where the death and rebirth of Moses and his gaining insight into future possibilities are crucial to the successful execution of God's deliverance for Israel. Through Yahweh's threat of death, Moses dies to his old self<sup>204</sup>—to his confused identity, his ambivalent feelings about his vocation, his conflicted self between family and people, and his past statuses as the adopted son of an Egyptian princess, an outsider among the Israelites, a criminal and a refugee, the son-in-law of a Midianite priest and the husband of a Midianite wife, an immigrant who has not fully embraced nor been fully embraced by his adopted place of residence, and a shepherd of a flock which belongs to somebody else. He is then "reborn" into a new community, identity, vocation, and status. The verb "kill" then is synonymous with transformation,<sup>205</sup> because transformation involves a disjunctive process, in which the person dies to certain aspects of his or her life.

*Initiation and Circumcision (The Child)*

The interesting thing about this passage, however, is that the third type of initiation—the passage from childhood to adulthood—is also brought in through the inclusion of the rite of circumcision. Whereas in the first two types of initiation the subject is Moses, in this third type of initiation the subject is Moses' son.

Moses' liminal experience is brought to a close through the action of circumcision; his initiation becomes complete when Zipporah cuts her son's foreskin and utters the words "You are my bridegroom of blood." The link between Moses' initiation and the circumcision of his son underscores the bond between father and son. Yet in what way does the initiation of the son bring about the initiation of the father?

Some see the circumcision of Moses' son as a vicarious circumcision of Moses. Because Moses has not been circumcised, God attacks him. By touching Moses' genitals with the blood from the circumcised child, Zipporah transfers the effects of the son's circumcision to Moses, and thus circumcises him vicariously.<sup>206</sup> On the other hand, there are those

<sup>204</sup> Cf. Ray Shankman, "The Cut That Unites: Word as Covenant in Exodus 4:24–26," *Cross Currents* 41 (1991): 172.

<sup>205</sup> Shankman, "Cut That Unites," 172.

<sup>206</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 58; Driver, *Exodus*, 32.



who think that the blood of circumcision is applied in a sacrificial way, to atone for Moses' guilt, so that it serves a propitiatory function.<sup>207</sup> Still others believe that the blood of circumcision performs an apotropaic function, warding off evil.<sup>208</sup>

An assumption underlying the first two interpretations (vicarious circumcision and sacrificial atonement) is first, Moses was the one attacked; and second, Moses' action was remiss in some way, such as he was uncircumcised or was guilty of a crime that had incurred God's wrath to the point of making him subject to capital punishment. Thus, much of the discussion has centered on whether Moses was circumcised or not,<sup>209</sup> or what kind of sin Moses committed.<sup>210</sup> No settled consensus has been reached on these issues. Everybody agrees, however, that there are no explicit clues in the text that indicate that Moses has committed a grievous sin. And although it is clear that the son was uncircumcised, the same claim cannot be made unequivocally regarding Moses. After evaluating the various reasons given for the attack, Sunoo concludes that there was nothing that Moses did to deserve punishment and that the responsibility for the attack rested solely with God.<sup>211</sup> If this is the case, the basis for vicarious circumcision and sacrificial atonement interpretations collapses.

Moreover, the idea of vicarious circumcision is questionable. first of all, it is unsupported in the First Testament and in the ancient Near East.<sup>212</sup> At the same time, touching Moses' genitals with his son's foreskin would not move Moses one inch toward being circumcised.<sup>213</sup> Without

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<sup>207</sup> Propp, *Exodus*, 236. Blood functioning in a sacrificial way is also the interpretation of the Targums and the LXX. See pp. 244–45 and 246–51. Cf. Houtman, "Exodus 4:24–26," 87–90, and Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," 459–61.

<sup>208</sup> Kosmala, "Bloody Husband," 24; Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband," 70; Sarna, *Exodus*, 26. See also chap. 3, n. 179, and n. 180, for additional bibliography.

<sup>209</sup> Some who think that Moses was uncircumcised are: Houtman, "Exodus 4:24–26," 98; Durham, *Exodus*, 58; Clements, *Exodus*, 31; Driver, *Exodus*, 32–33.

<sup>210</sup> Aside from Moses being uncircumcised, other reasons offered for Yahweh's attack are: (1) Moses failed to circumcise his son (Schmidt, *Exodus 1/1–6/30*, 229; Cassuto, *Exodus*, 59; Allen, "Bloody Bridegroom," 27); (2) Moses had unexpiated blood guilt because he killed an Egyptian (Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 235; P. Middlekoop, "The Significance of the Story of the Bloody Husband," *SEAJT* 8 (1967): 35–37); (3) he was ambivalent in accepting God's commission (Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," 456; Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father*, 43); (4) he lived a life of concealment, concealing his crime and most of all, concealing his Israelite identity, as seen in his omitting to perform the rite of circumcision on his son (Gelernter, "Tsipporah's Bloodgroom," 53–54).

<sup>211</sup> Sunoo, "God Burst Forth," 51–64.

<sup>212</sup> Sunoo, "God Burst Forth," 40.

<sup>213</sup> Cf. Allen, "Bloody Bridegroom," 263.

this ineradicable mark, Moses would still be an outsider, not sharing in the sign that binds Israelite families together under the covenant. “Circumcision is by definition a sign in the flesh; it is not clear what would remain of the sign without the element of flesh-cutting.”<sup>214</sup> Even if Moses needed re-circumcision because the Egyptian circumcision was not complete,<sup>215</sup> touching Moses’ genitals with his son’s foreskin would hardly constitute an improvement. In addition, this interpretation assumes that “feet” here is a euphemism for genitals,<sup>216</sup> which would only apply if Moses was vicariously circumcised (a circular argument).<sup>217</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the rites of circumcision and Passover have been linked by their being considered apotropaic rites. Commentators have associated **והגעתם אל-המשקוף ואל-שתי** in 4:25 with **והגעתם אל-המשקוף ואל-שתי** of the Passover rite in 12:22, because of the verbal connections created by the verb **נגע** (*hiphil*) and the references to blood. Just as touching (**והגעתם**) the doorposts with blood spared a household from the smiting hand of God, touching (**והגעתם**) the object of God’s attack (whether Moses or the son) with the blood from the cut off foreskin also spared that life. Thus, “touching” is understood in the sense of smearing or dabbing of blood, because blood shed in circumcision is understood to have the power to ward off evil.<sup>218</sup>

There is indeed a link between circumcision and the rites of Passover, as was discussed earlier in chap. 3.<sup>219</sup> Only the circumcised are allowed to eat the Passover meal (Exod 12:43–49), so that a mass circumcision had to be undertaken to enable the whole community to partake of the Passover meal again in the borders of Canaan (Josh 5:2–11).<sup>220</sup> Moreover, the incident of the killing of the firstborn is foreshadowed in 4:23 in Yahweh’s speech to Moses, and this further connects the two incidents. However, it seems to me that if the concern of the text in 4:25 is to point out the importance of blood in protecting one from destruction, then it would have been made more explicit in stating that

<sup>214</sup> Sunoo, “God Burst Forth,” 40.

<sup>215</sup> See Sasson, “Circumcision,” (see chap. 3, n. 123). For his arguments on second circumcision, see chap. 3, n. 175.

<sup>216</sup> See chap. 3, n. 31.

<sup>217</sup> Noel Osborn, “Circumspection About Circumcision in Exodus 4:24–26,” in *Issues in Bible Translation* (UBS Monograph Series; ed. Philip C. Stine; London: United Bible Societies, 1988), 253.

<sup>218</sup> Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 117; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 63.

<sup>219</sup> See pp. 136–40.

<sup>220</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 25.

Zipporah “touched” the רגלים with blood. The association with blood is only inferred from Zipporah’s rather cryptic statement, “You are a bridegroom of blood,” and could not be made a basis for a parallel between the two incidents in terms of the apotropaic value of blood.

There are other reasons why the apotropaic view is problematic. first, as mentioned earlier, circumcision was not mentioned as a requirement for participating in the first Passover meal.<sup>221</sup> It was also not stated as a prerequisite for averting the slaughter of the destroyer. Circumcision was only mentioned as a requirement in subsequent celebrations of the Passover, indicating that the practice of circumcision is not connected to being protected from the plague of the firstborn. It was not the blood of circumcision that was applied to the doorposts, but rather the blood of a lamb. Moreover, in other texts about circumcision, no mention is made of blood or its significance. It is the action of cutting the foreskin that is given significance and not the blood spilled during the act.<sup>222</sup> The view then that Zipporah touched either her son or her husband’s genitals with the son’s bloody foreskin in order to avert the attack is not sufficiently supported by this passage or other passages regarding circumcision. For this reason, rather than the translation “she *touched* his feet with it” for ותגע לרגלים, which is how most scholars translate it, I prefer to render it, “she *cast it down* at his feet.”<sup>223</sup>

If it is not a vicarious, sacrificial, or apotropaic rite, what then is the significance of circumcision in this passage? Rather than being limited to a single explanation, several possibilities emerge as one connects the act of circumcision in this episode with the different levels of meaning of circumcision discussed in chap. 3.<sup>224</sup>

When seen in light of the metaphorical meaning of circumcision as attaining one’s full and proper function, the rite’s significance lies in its becoming instrumental in overcoming whatever hesitancy Moses has in responding to God’s call, so that he can effectively fulfill his role as God’s messenger. The rite helps to rectify Moses’ initial inadequate response through a decisive act that resolves whatever ambivalence is left in him. Rappaport points out that rites help to resolve ambiguity

<sup>221</sup> See p. 138.

<sup>222</sup> Cf. Lindström, *Origin of Evil*, 43.

<sup>223</sup> The meaning “to cast down, to throw” for the *hiphil* of נגע is attested in Isa 26:5; Lam 2:2; Ezek 13:14. See Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26,” 85 (cf. Driver, *Exodus*, 32); Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:437. See chap. 3, n. 31 for additional discussion. Lam 2:2 shows a parallel with the use of the preposition ל.

<sup>224</sup> See p. 140.

because they transmit a binary signal (yes/no, either/or, boy/man, insider/outsider). The performance of a rite is often preceded by a continuous or gradual complex process, or by a period of uncertainty or ambiguity. The complexity or ambiguity is summarized or clarified by the rite's binary structure. Thus, puberty rites are preceded by a period of gradual and continuous maturation, often not visible and undefined, when a person is not sure whether to act like a child or an adult. The rite, however, culminates this process. It communicates to everyone, including the person himself or herself, that he or she is already an adult.<sup>225</sup> Regardless of the person's continuing ambivalence, the rite's performance means that a decisive action has been taken, which irrevocably redefines the person's social status and role.<sup>226</sup> With regard to Moses, it is possible that he has been undergoing a process of coming to terms with his new vocation ever since his initial hesitancy and objections to accepting it. The performance of circumcision then culminates this process, and signals to Moses himself, to his family, and to God that he has embraced his new vocation.

The function of resolving ambiguities and culminating complex processes also applies to the significance of circumcision as the culminating act in the rite of transition.

Circumcision marks a person's separation from a previous phase of life as well as a transition and entrance into a new phase of existence or a new community. Other rituals that equally emphasize the three stages of separation, transition, and incorporation accompany many circumcision ceremonies. In this episode, however, in which the actual circumcision is unaccompanied by other rituals, the stages of separation and incorporation occur at the same time, with no transition stage, for the act that cuts is also the act that binds.<sup>227</sup> Thus, the action of cutting the foreskin removes the person from the common mass of humanity and at the same time automatically incorporates him into a group defined by an ineradicable trace.<sup>228</sup> The fact that circumcision cannot be undone makes the change of state an irrevocable one.

Circumcision marks a break from the past and an entry into a new phase of life. For Moses this future not only involves a new vocation, but also a new status, identity, and community. The new vocation brings

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<sup>225</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 89–91.

<sup>226</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 103.

<sup>227</sup> This is a slight revision of Shankman's title, "Cut that Unites."

<sup>228</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 72.

with it a rise in social status. Moses' sojourn in Midian involved a loss of social status. From being the son of Pharaoh's daughter, he became a refugee and a nondescript shepherd in Midian. The text emphasizes that the flock was not his own (3:1). Moses was not building his own household or acquiring his own possessions, but rather working for his father-in-law.<sup>229</sup> As a גר Moses did not have social protection and privilege, and thus, must place himself in a dependent relationship on someone else.<sup>230</sup> In Israelite law, the גר is classed with the widows and the orphans as needing social justice, which shows that they are economically vulnerable and prone to exploitation.<sup>231</sup> In returning to Egypt, Moses sheds off his dependent, shepherd status, and comes into his own, as head of his own household and a leader of his own people. He also takes on an unambiguous and decided identity as the legitimate representative of the Israelites, recognized by his own family, the elders of Israel, and by Pharaoh. As in Genesis 17 and Joshua 5, circumcision in this passage marks a change in status—from a life of insignificance and disgrace to that of dignity and purpose.

But the question remains: how is the child's circumcision related to the initiation of the father? First of all, as discussed in chap. 3, circumcision is not an individual rite, but a family one. It marks the identity of the family and not just the child. The circumcision of a child shows that circumcision is practiced in the household of which the child is a member. This means that Moses is implicated in the circumcision of his son, not because of vicarious or sacrificial circumcision, but because he is the head and representative of the household unit. If indeed Moses is teetering between call and family, the circumcision of his son becomes the decisive event for the resolution of this conflict. The act of circumcision culminates the convergence between the family and vocation themes. Through an act that gives preeminence to God's call, it paves the way for the integration of family and vocation. Thus, the new beginning applies not only to Moses, but also to his whole family.

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<sup>229</sup> Hays, "The Private Man," 20. This is the same with Jacob, who tended the flock of his father-in-law Laban. After some time, Jacob felt the need to establish his own household and requested for permission to leave. As a compromise, Laban offered to give him wages, which meant that for all the former years of his service to Laban up to this point, Jacob was not given wages and did not have the chance to build up his own property. It was after this point that Jacob began to acquire his own flock, even as he continued to take care of his father-in-law's flock (Gen 30:25–43).

<sup>230</sup> Spina, "Israelites as *gerim*," 323.

<sup>231</sup> Cristiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 160.

Secondly, the function of circumcision as a symbol of fertility and family continuity, as presented in chap. 3, brings to light why the child's circumcision is significant for Moses. For the descendants of Abraham this function is tied to God's covenant with Abraham, involving the promise of numerous and eminent descendants. The performance of the rite is a means of appropriating this promise for the new generation. The circumcision of the child is a sign to Moses that God's promise of fertility and continuity remains. Furthermore, it shows that Moses has come to terms with the memories of the past and has acknowledged his indissoluble link as a fellow heir, along with the Israelite victims of the Egyptian oppression, to God's promises to the patriarchs. Circumcision, therefore, is a sign of hope that, in spite of the degrading and threatening conditions of the Israelites in Egypt, death and shame are not their final destiny.

The circumcision of the child then enables Moses' whole family to participate in appropriating the promises that God made to Abraham. These promises create a community of promise, and circumcision acts as a rite of inclusion into this community. Thus, the child's circumcision is a means by which he is initiated, not into puberty, but into the covenant community.<sup>232</sup> As explained in chap. 3, Israel differs from the surrounding nations in its practice of circumcision, in that the rite is performed at infancy rather than at the onset of puberty. This underscores the character of the rite as an initiation rite into the community that owes its existence to the fulfillment of God's promises to its ancestors. Born of a Midianite mother and raised up in a Midianite household, with a father who has an ambivalent identity, the child also has an ambiguous identity.<sup>233</sup> The mark of the circumcision, however, indelibly identifies him as a member of the Israelite community and as a child of the covenant, notwithstanding his mixed parentage. With circumcision, the identity of the child becomes unambiguous.

But more than this, the circumcision of the child initiates Moses' family into the community of Israel. In Midian, Moses and Zipporah and whatever offspring they had automatically became a part of Jethro's Midianite household. The act of circumcision loosens this relationship, so

<sup>232</sup> Hyatt, *IDB* 1:630; de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 1:48.

<sup>233</sup> The child in 4:25 is described as "her son" (Childs, *Exodus*, 103; Blum and Blum, "Zippora," 44). Perhaps this designation emphasizes that the child's identity before being circumcised is primarily derived from his Midianite mother.

that Moses becomes established as head of his own Israelite household. The fact that the sign is made on the son's generative organ is particularly appropriate, since he represents the link to future generations. His circumcision defines the identity of the line of Moses—not Egyptian or Midianite, but Israelite. Thus, the child's circumcision puts a stamp on the identity, not just of the existing generation, but of the coming generations as well. Perhaps it is in this way—as referring to the coming generations—that we should read the plural feminine form מולת in 4:26. With the preposition (למולת) the phrase is variously translated “because of the circumcision,” “with reference to the circumcision,” “by means of the circumcision.” The noun is used only one time (the singular form of the noun, מולה, derived from the verb מול, is also not attested) in the First Testament. The feminine plural ending is not unusual for a masculine noun, as Cassuto explains,<sup>234</sup> but why the plural ending? Propp considers it a plural of abstraction, hence, “by act of circumcision,”<sup>235</sup> and most translate the word as singular. However, based on the above reading, מולת may refer to the circumcision of future generations, who are now identified as belonging to Israel, thus the plural “circumcisions.”<sup>236</sup> Circumcision as a household rite encompasses not only everyone in the household, but all the descendants as well.<sup>237</sup> When read in this way, the preposition ל in למולת takes on a double-meaning. Aside from the usual translation “in reference to,” or “referring to,” it may also have the sense of “for someone's advantage or benefit,”<sup>238</sup> thus translated “for the circumcisions.” The editor is perhaps commenting on how Zipporah's action of circumcising her son and her utterance of חתן דמים “bridegroom of blood” have implications for the circumcision and hence, the identity, of future generations.

Frank Gorman comments how the dynamics of a narrative are often used to understand a rite, but the opposite is also possible—the

<sup>234</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 61. See GKC § 87p; Joüon § 90d. For a discussion of how למולת has been interpreted, see Houtman, “Exodus 4:24–26,” 86; Houtman, *Exodus*, 1: 438.

<sup>235</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 220. Cf. Sarna, *Exodus*, 26; Schneeman, “Die Deutung der Beschneidung,” 36 (see chap. 3, n. 3). For the use of the plural with singular nouns expressing abstraction, intensity, multiplicity, and extension, see Joüon § 136a–k; GKC § 124a–f.

<sup>236</sup> Thus, it refers to a series of circumcisions, not to circumcision in general. See Serge Frolov, “The Hero as Bloody Bridegroom: On the Meaning and Origin of Exodus 4, 26,” *Bib* 77 (1996): 521.

<sup>237</sup> Schneeman, “Die Deutung der Beschneidung,” 22.

<sup>238</sup> See Joüon § 133d.

dynamics of a rite can be used to understand a narrative.<sup>239</sup> This is particularly true of Exod 4:18–26, in which the rite of circumcision can be used as a lens through which to understand the movement of the narrative.

Circumcision shows the dynamics of separation and incorporation, of death and rebirth, through the act of cutting the foreskin.<sup>240</sup> The dynamic of separation is seen when Moses says goodbye to his father-in-law. However, a more complete separation is needed—a separation that is akin to death. Yahweh threatens with death the intergenerational link of father and son, and threatens as well the family's survival and continuity. This is suggested by the use of a more picturesque and unusual phrase, **כרת את-ערל**, instead of **מול** or **מלל**, which is used in all the other passages in the First Testament regarding circumcision.<sup>241</sup> The use of the verb **כרת** evokes the multi-layered process of death. In its most basic sense in the *qal*, **כרת** means the severance or separation of a part of something, such as the branches and fruit of a vine (Num 13:23), the corner of a garment (1 Sam 24:5 [6]), or the parts of the body, i.e. head and hands (1 Sam 5:4), so that it is often translated to “cut off” or “cut down.”<sup>242</sup> The use of **כרת** in Exod 4:25 creates a link with castration, the severance of the male organ (cf. Deut 23:2[1]; Lev 22:24),<sup>243</sup> which can be interpreted psychoanalytically as indicating the “unmanning of Moses,”<sup>244</sup> but more likely reflecting sterility and lack of offspring. Hence, the use of **כרת את-ערל** may indicate that the act of circumcision in this passage is seen as a counterpart to Yahweh's threat to the family's fertility and continuity. Aside from its basic meaning, however, **כרת** also has an extended sense in the *hiphil*, which means to exterminate, destroy, strike, or annihilate.<sup>245</sup> Thus, the phrase also calls to mind Yahweh's deadly attack, with circumcision substituting for Yahweh's threat of death. In addition, predominantly in the *niphal*, **כרת**

<sup>239</sup> Frank H. Gorman, Jr., “Ritual Studies and Biblical Studies: Assessment of the Past, Prospects for the Future,” *Semeia* 67 (1994): 22–23.

<sup>240</sup> Shankman, “Cut That Unites,” 172.

<sup>241</sup> Schmidt, *Exodus 1/1–6/30*, 219; Kessler, “Psychoanalysis,” 32, 42, 47; Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:436; Sarna, *Exodus*, 26; Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63.

<sup>242</sup> G. F. Hasel, “**כרת**,” *TDOT* 7:344–45.

<sup>243</sup> Houtman, 1:436.

<sup>244</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*, 159–60; Kessler, “Psychoanalysis,” 47; Goldingay, “Circumcision,” 11–13.

<sup>245</sup> Hasel, *TDOT* 7:346.



is used as a formula for exclusion from the community.<sup>246</sup> Circumcision, as discussed in chap. 3, is a rite of both exclusion and inclusion. As argued above, Yahweh's death threat forces a crisis in identity, leading to the death of the old identity. The use of כרת then also evokes the separation of Moses and his family from their old identity and community. To sum up, the action of cutting in circumcision, because it symbolizes death and separation, functions as the embodied equivalent of Yahweh's death threat. It is for this reason that the performance of the rite averts the attack and leads to the slackening of Yahweh's hold on the victim. Through circumcision, the death experience necessary for a successful transition is met.

But at the same time, the act of cutting the foreskin symbolizes birth and continuity. The use of the phrase כרת את-ערל is not only significant in terms of the death process, but also that of rebirth. The use of כרת brings to mind the formula for making a covenant ברית, כרת את ברית,<sup>247</sup> which is believed to be associated with the animal-cutting ceremony that ratifies a covenant (Gen 15:7–21).<sup>248</sup> This recalls the association of circumcision with God's covenant with Abraham and its promise of fertility and numerous descendants. Whereas Yahweh's attack involves a threat to the continuity of Moses' family, circumcision releases his family to fertility and growth. The line of Moses is not going to be decimated, but will produce a succession of generations. Moreover, his descendants will enjoy God's promise of the good land. It is appropriate, at this juncture, when the Israelite community is threatened by oppression, decimation, and death, that this rite takes place in the family of the would-be deliverer. It is a sign of hope that God has not forgotten his covenant with Abraham (Exod 2:24), to bless his descendants with fertility and give them their own land (Gen 17:1–8).

The act of circumcision enables Moses' family to be reborn into a new identity as a family that belongs to the people of Yahweh. The family's survival, fertility, and continuity are assured, but this time these are realized within the framework of God's promises to Abraham. The rites of incorporation that then follow in 4:27–31 simply recognize and affirm the fundamental transformation that has occurred. Through the rite of circumcision, Moses and his family have taken their place among

<sup>246</sup> E.g., Gen 17:14; Exod 12:15, 19; 30:33, 38; Lev 7:20, 21, 25, 27; Num 9:13; 15:30; 19:13, 20.

<sup>247</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 26.

<sup>248</sup> Hasel, *TDOT* 7:349–52.

Moses' people. "[B]y circumcising the child the mother caused the entire family to enter into the redemptive event as full-fledged members of the house of Israel."<sup>249</sup> They are now identified with the Israelites, as objects of Pharaoh's cruelty and intimidation, but also as recipients of Yahweh's compassion and promise.

*Initiation and the Bridegroom of Blood (Zipporah)*

What then of Zipporah? What is her role in the rite of initiation? Through Zipporah's phrase "A bridegroom of blood you are to me," another rite of passage is invoked. Thus, three powerful rites of passage converge in these verses, each involving some form of initiation and transformation. The father goes through a liminal experience, the child goes through circumcision, and the mother through her speech calls to mind the marriage rite.

The phrase **חתן דמים** has generated a great deal of discussion. Although the meaning of the root word **חתן** itself is clear, as referring to a father-in-law, son-in-law, brother-in-law, or bridegroom (all of these being male relatives by marriage),<sup>250</sup> none of these meanings seems to fit the context. The meaning of bridegroom would seem to fit best, if the utterance is addressed to Moses, because Moses is husband to Zipporah, and hence a relative by marriage. But why use the word bridegroom for someone to whom one has been married for a long time and with whom one has borne children?<sup>251</sup> And if husband is all that is meant, why is it that one of the common words for husband, **איש** or **בעל**, is not used?

The bound form **חתן דמים** is also unique. The majority take the view that **דמים** here refers to the blood that is shed during the circumcision, which is applied to Moses' or the child's genitals (or legs). But as was pointed out earlier, this interpretation would only hold true if circumcision is regarded as a vicarious, sacrificial, or apotropaic rite, and reasons were stated above why this may not be the case. Moreover, as mentioned above, if a blood rite were invoked by Zipporah's statement, then it would have been made explicit in the actual performance of the rite itself, considering that it would have been seen as the key element in averting the attack.

<sup>249</sup> Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 118, n. 1.

<sup>250</sup> See T. C. Mitchell, "The Meaning of the Noun *htn* in the Old Testament," *VT* 19 (1969): 93–112.

<sup>251</sup> Houtman, "Exodus 4:24–26," 85.

Instead of focusing on the first word of the bound form, **חַתָּן**, Propp looks at the meaning of **דָּמִים** in the plural. In contrast to the singular form, the plural form is used in the context of bloodguilt, either to the blood shed by the killer, or to the guilt of those who commit heinous crimes.<sup>252</sup> According to Propp, Moses was guilty of murder for having killed an Egyptian. Being out of asylum in returning to Egypt, Moses was attacked by Yahweh because of Moses' unexpiated bloodguilt.<sup>253</sup>

Indeed, most of the occurrences of the plural form **דָּמִים** refer to bloodguilt or to blood shed in a crime,<sup>254</sup> although the singular form is also used.<sup>255</sup> Propp's view, however, raises some problems. Propp objects to the interpretation that the reason for Yahweh's attack is Moses' failure to circumcise his son. He says, "It seems unfair and implausible that readers should be expected to infer both the requirement of circumcision and Moses' omission of the rite merely from the cryptic Exod. iv. 24–6."<sup>256</sup> Yet he commits the same mistake by expecting readers to infer the whole system of bloodguilt and asylum from the same cryptic verses. In the first place, there are no indications from the text as to how Yahweh or the narrator viewed Moses' killing of the Egyptian. There are only references to how Pharaoh and his cohorts, as well as some Israelites, reacted to the action. Pharaoh and his servants sought to kill Moses (2:15; 4:19), while some Israelites objected to what they saw as an illegitimate exercise of power over them (2:14). Yet from the narrator or from Yahweh, there was no word of condemnation or

<sup>252</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 219–20, 234–36, citing Gen 4:10, 11; 1 Kgs 2:5; 2 Kgs 9:26; Lev 20:9, 11, 12, 13, etc. See also Propp, "Bloody Bridegroom," 496–97. Here he follows Schneeman, who translates the phrase as a "bridegroom who has shed blood." Schneeman, "Die Deutung der Beschneidung," 34–35. The above is a summary of her dissertation completed in the Comenius Fakultät in Prague (1979), to which I do not have access. See also Schneeman's shorter summary of the same work in *TLZ* 105 (1980): 794. Schneeman, however, thinks that Zipporah is addressing Yahweh, not Moses.

<sup>253</sup> Propp, "Bloody Bridegroom," 501–506. Cf. Middlekoop, "Significance of 'Bloody Husband,'" 34–38; Frolov, "Hero as Blood Bridegroom," 520–21.

<sup>254</sup> GKC § 124n. There are only a few instances when **דָּמִים** refers to something else other than bloodshed or bloodguilt. These are discussed below.

<sup>255</sup> B. Kedar-Kopfstein, "דָּם," *TDOT* 3:235–36. Although there is some consistency in the use of the singular to refer to one's own blood or to blood as part of a closed system, while the plural is used for the blood of another which has been shed violently and for blood that spills out, the two forms are also used interchangeably. Thus, "[T]he hypothesis of a strict logical and conceptual distinction between *dam* and *damim* cannot be maintained" (*ibid.*).

<sup>256</sup> Propp, "Bloody Bridegroom," 500.

warning; only a message of assurance from Yahweh that it was safe to return to Egypt. Secondly, in order for Propp's theory to work, he had to argue (unpersuasively) that Moses' killing of the Egyptian falls under the purview of unintentional killing, which is the precondition for a person to be accepted into the cities of refuge (Num 35:11, 15, 22–25; Deut 4:41–42; Josh 20:2–6).<sup>257</sup> Moreover, Propp's claim that "an Israelite reader would have understood Moses' flight to Midian... as a murderer's quest for asylum"<sup>258</sup> is unsubstantiated. Propp does not explain why Midian would be understood by the ancient readers as functioning in the same way as the cities of refuge did. Lastly, Propp assumes with others who hold the sacrificial view of circumcision, that it was the blood of circumcision that atoned for Moses' guilt. But his interpretation of חתן דמים as "bridegroom of blood that has been shed" eliminates what others consider an oblique reference to the blood of circumcision. And if there is no reference to the blood of circumcision in this passage, what is the basis then for Propp's conclusion that it was this blood that expiated Moses' bloodguilt?

Instead of focusing on the lexical meaning of חתן דמים, one way to approach the problem is to take an indirect route, first, by analyzing the elements, encoded messages, and functions involved in Zipporah's performance of the rite, and second, by looking into the illocutionary force of Zipporah's statement within its context as part of a rite of passage, specifically as the climax of a series of events in an initiation rite. The speech should not be seen as isolated from the sequence of events that constitutes the rite. This sequence is as follows: (1) Zipporah cuts off the foreskin of her son; (2) Zipporah throws the foreskin at someone's feet; (3) Zipporah says to someone, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me." The rite in turn is enclosed within a short narrative account of a death threat and the averting of that threat. This death threat in turn is a constituent part of an initiation rite, in which death and rebirth are central components.

Rites, according to Rappaport, are performative actions that seek to communicate canonical and self-referential meanings. Canonical messages are communicated by the invariant aspects of the rite—to what has been performed or spoken before—and are encoded in the rite itself. Self-referential messages, on the other hand, are communicated by the

<sup>257</sup> Propp, "Bloody Bridegroom," 503.

<sup>258</sup> Propp, "Bloody Bridegroom," 504.

variant aspects and are encoded by the participants themselves. Since canonical messages are already encoded in the rite, they cannot reflect the participants' contemporary states. It is the self-referential messages that accomplish this. Participants draw from the fixed and stabilized meanings of the rite as expressed in its established forms to communicate their current physical, psychic, or social states. By introducing variations in the rite, they place themselves in a certain relation to the invariant meanings of the rite—a relation that changes depending on the particular context of performance.<sup>259</sup> Rappaport's notion of canonical and self-referential messages in the rite resonates with Ricoeur's concept of the interplay between sedimentation and innovation. The canonical corresponds to the idea of sedimentation, which produces the literary types that have been fixed by tradition, while the self-referential corresponds to the concept of innovation, which engenders deviations from historical paradigms.<sup>260</sup>

The rite of circumcision, as discussed above and in chap. 3, has multiple canonical messages, which are expressed through its invariant aspects. The performance of the rite signals that a transitional event is taking place. The act of cutting the foreskin culminates this event through a symbolic separation from a previous state and a symbolic initiation into a new one. The nature of circumcision as a family rite emphasizes the family's fertility and continuity through an act that symbolizes the attainment of one's full and proper sexual function. In the Israelite community, circumcision takes on another canonical meaning. It is regarded as the means of accepting God's promises to Abraham and his descendants, and therefore, also as a way of entering and participating in the covenant community.

However, the performance of the rite in Exod 4:25 has certain variations and it is through these that self-referential messages are communicated. Although the time of the rite, its geographical space, and the object used in its performance reinforce some of the canonical messages,<sup>261</sup> there is enough variation in these aspects to introduce a self-referential message. The time is during a journey, the place is between Midian and Egypt, and the object used is a flint, emphasizing

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<sup>259</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 52–54.

<sup>260</sup> See p. 000.

<sup>261</sup> Time, space, and implements used are important elements in ritual. See Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 31–34; Grainger, *Language of Rite*, 107–172.

the transitional character of the event. The scene parallels the mass circumcision during Joshua's time, in which the people of Israel are also on a journey, they have left Egypt but have not entered Canaan, and they are circumcised by the use of flint knives (Josh 5:2–9). However, there is a sinister character to the scene in Exod 4:24–25,<sup>262</sup> which is not present in the Joshua passage. The rite takes place at night. The night motif in some biblical narratives spells danger,<sup>263</sup> since crime, threats, and destruction happen at night. An element of foreboding and menace surrounds the scene.<sup>264</sup> Instead of inside the home, the rite is performed in an unnamed place, with no other people or houses mentioned, reminding one of the perils that travelers face when stopping at an unfamiliar place. The use of a flint knife, instead of an iron instrument, which would presumably be used if the rite were performed in the home, shows the existence of an emergency situation. All these variations indicate that the participants in the rite are in a crisis state.

Ritual, according to Victor Turner, is one type of redressive mechanism for addressing a situation of mounting crisis, when there is a breach of regular, norm-governed social relations between persons or groups belonging to the same social system. Through the symbolic action of ritual, reconciliation and reintegration can take place.<sup>265</sup> If this is the case, one function of Zipporah's action is to restore a breach that has taken place through the non-fulfillment of a crucial norm. But what norm has been broken? What breach has taken place? What kind of crisis has occurred? The only action in which a clear norm has been broken is Yahweh's unexpected attack on a vulnerable traveler. But does Zipporah's action intend to repair the breach that Yahweh's action has created?

As argued above, Yahweh's death threat is a constituent part of a rite of transition and initiation. The ambiguous state of Moses and his family, and the ambivalence of Moses toward his call, show a breach

<sup>262</sup> G. W. Ashby, "The Bloody Bridegroom: The Interpretation of Exodus 4:24–26," In *ExpTim* 106 (1995): 203.

<sup>263</sup> Weston W. Fields, "The Motif 'Night' as Danger," in *'Sha'arei Talmon': Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemarhayu Talmon* (ed. Michael Fishbane and Emmanuel Tov and Weston W. Fields; Winona Lake; Eisenbrauns, 1992), 17–32. He gives Gen 19, Josh 2, and Judg 19 as examples. A closer parallel to Exod 4:24–26 is the night attack on Jacob (Gen 32:25–33).

<sup>264</sup> Fields, "Night as Danger," 22.

<sup>265</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 38–41.

in social relations in which the precise connection of Moses to the Egyptians and the Israelites is left undefined.<sup>266</sup> This in-between state is particularly polluting, since anything that cannot be unambiguously classified (by society's conventional criteria) is regarded as ritually unclean.<sup>267</sup> Moreover, danger is seen to be inherent in transitional states, so that the person who passes from one state to another brings danger to himself or herself and endangers others. Rituals function to control this danger by clearing up the ambiguity through the process of separating the person from the old status, segregating him or her for a time, and publicly declaring entry into the new status.<sup>268</sup> In order for the ambiguity in Moses' situation to become defined, a form of death is necessary. The rite of circumcision is the embodied equivalence of Yahweh's death threat. Thus, through the rite, the process of death and rebirth is acted out, and the ambivalence that produced the crisis is resolved.

The rite in Exod 4:24–26 includes variations other than space, time, and object used. There are additional sequences to the rite that seem to be peculiar to this particular occurrence, since they are not reported in any other instance of circumcision in the First Testament. After cutting off her child's foreskin, Zipporah casts the foreskin at someone's feet. Again, there is no antecedent, so we are not sure whether the "feet" belong to Moses, the child, or Yahweh. It is possible, however, to construe the intention of the act. Since the action is done to avert a crisis, we can infer that the foreskin serves as evidence that the deed has been accomplished and that death and separation have taken place from the former structures of life. Within this sequence, Zipporah's speech that follows, *חתן דמים אתה לי* ("you are a bridegroom of blood for me"), which introduces another variation, may be interpreted as an affirmation and declaration of a new relationship<sup>269</sup> that results from rebirth and incorporation.

Aside from being a redressive mechanism for addressing social crises, rituals function also as a reflexive mechanism, as a means of communicating something about the relationship of the participants

<sup>266</sup> Cf. Blum and Blum, "Zippora," 45, who propose that Moses' non-ordered family relationships were the reason for the attack.

<sup>267</sup> Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 97, referring to Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966).

<sup>268</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 96.

<sup>269</sup> Cf. Kaiser, *Deus Absconditus*, 83–84.

to each other, to society, to the world, to the cosmos, and to God.<sup>270</sup> The direction of the communication need not always be outward. The participants themselves may be the receivers of the messages they communicate. Rituals “inform participants of changes in themselves or perhaps it would be better to say *with* changes in themselves.”<sup>271</sup> As stated above, this self-referential information, which comprises the current state of the participants, is communicated through variations in the rite. Thus, Zipporah’s speech can be read as communicating something about her and her relationship to others around her. The content of this message becomes clearer as we look at the illocutionary force of Zipporah’s speech.

The force of Zipporah’s speech can only be ascertained in relation to the performative force of the entire ritual act of circumcision. As expounded above, the rite indicates acceptance on Moses’ part of his new vocation and status, and on Moses’ family part, of their new identity and community. Although not couched in the form of a promise, the act still has the force of a commissive, in that it entails commitment to responsibilities and obligations arising from the choice of a vocation and community. The rite then is self-involving. It functions in the same way as the response of “I do” to the question “Do you take this person to be your spouse?” in a marriage rite, in which the brief response involves the acceptance of a whole range of commitments and responsibilities. Within this ritual setting, Zipporah’s speech seems to function as an assertive-declaration, completing the process of bringing about a state of affairs by indicating this new state of affairs. Her pronouncement of a new relationship functions like the proclamation “I now declare you husband and wife” in a marriage rite. This pronouncement, however, has implications not only for the other members of her family, but also for herself.

It seems to me then that one need not do away with the simple meaning of “bridegroom” for *ḥתן*. If read in the context of an initiation rite, it is appropriate for Zipporah to invoke the marriage rite. With Moses’ change of state, the marriage itself receives a new configuration, and in a certain sense, Zipporah takes her husband again as a new bridegroom.<sup>272</sup> The act of circumcision does not only entail a change

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<sup>270</sup> Gorman, “Ritual Studies,” 24; *Ideology of Ritual*, 21–22.

<sup>271</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 113.

<sup>272</sup> Schmidt, *Exodus 1/1–6/30*, 231.



for Moses and the son, but also has implications for Zipporah as well. According to Van Gennepe, a marriage rite connotes separation from a former group, as well as incorporation of a stranger into a new group. Hence, it is sometimes identical to adoption ceremonies.<sup>273</sup> Through his marriage to a Midianite daughter, Moses was incorporated into Jethro's household and to the Midianite community. But through the circumcision of the son, Zipporah is separated from her Midianite community, and is incorporated into the Israelite community.<sup>274</sup> It is in this sense then that Zipporah has become married anew, and her speech makes this new relationship explicit.<sup>275</sup> Through a speech act that asserts as well as declares, Zipporah redefines Moses' relationship to her, and consequently, her relationship to Moses. The performance of the rite of circumcision has engendered a new marriage relationship.<sup>276</sup> Thus, Zipporah's pronouncement is a way of integrating herself and her son (as well as her husband) into the Israelite clan.<sup>277</sup>

However, the ambiguity in the pronoun prevents us from exclusively applying *חתן דמי* to the father alone. Since the antecedent is not clear as in other parts of this mysterious tale, the phrase could be addressed to the child and not to Moses. Some have connected *חתן* with an Arabic verbal root which means "to circumcise" and with Akkadian *hatānu* which means "to protect, shelter."<sup>278</sup> Thus, the phrase may have been intended to carry a double-entendre, embracing both father and child. Whereas the meaning "bridegroom" would apply to Moses, the meaning "circumcised one" would apply to the child.<sup>279</sup> Through this double meaning, two rites of passage are brought together: circumcision and marriage. The first pertains to the child, the second to the woman, but both negotiate change for the man. Through these rites, Moses' initiation is brought to a climax and this particular liminal experience comes to an end.

<sup>273</sup> Van Gennepe, *Rites of Passage*, 129, 141.

<sup>274</sup> It is interesting that in a later reference, Jethro brought Zipporah and her sons back to Moses after Moses had sent them away (Exod 18:2–6), which indicates that Jethro sees them as belonging to the Israelite community.

<sup>275</sup> Blum and Blum, "Zippora," 45.

<sup>276</sup> Blum and Blum, "Zippora," 50.

<sup>277</sup> Kaiser, "*Deus absconditus*," 84–85.

<sup>278</sup> Kosmala, "Bloody Husband," 27; Sarna, *Exodus*, 26; J. de Groot, "The Story of the Bloody Husband," *OTS* 2 (1943): 13–14; William Dumbrell, "Exodus 4:24–26: A Textual Re-examination," *HTR* 65 (1972): 286–87.

<sup>279</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 238.

The meaning of the second half of the bound form **דמים** is more difficult to ascertain. Morgenstern suggests that it connotes becoming a full member of the clan, a person who is now considered “related by blood.”<sup>280</sup> He understands Zipporah’s pronouncement as an act of welcoming the child into her clan, the Midianite clan.<sup>281</sup> Aside from the fact that this interpretation would have no relation to the movement of the narrative unit, which is to ensure that God’s message is delivered to the Israelites through Moses, the problem with this view is that there is no lexical support for the meaning of **דם** or **דמים** as blood relation, for which the expression **עצם ובשר** “bone and flesh” is more commonly used.<sup>282</sup> **דם** in the singular is used to refer to the blood of both humans and animals, to the blood from a sacrifice, and to blood shed violently. The plural form **דמים**, as mentioned above, refers mostly to blood that has been shed or to bloodguilt.

There are a few instances, however, where the plural **דמים** (as well as the singular) refers to menstrual blood (Lev 20:18; Lev 15:19 [sing]) or to birth blood (Lev 12:4, 7; Eze 16:6–9; Eze 16:22 [sing]). In the following, I explore the meaning of **דמים** in relation to menstrual and birth blood as expressing a situation of ambiguity and an in-between state.

In Lev 12:2–8, references to a woman’s birth blood and the rite of circumcision are brought together. The passage prescribes the period of uncleanness for a woman who becomes pregnant (*hiphil* of **זרע**, literally, “to produce seed”) and gives birth. If the child is a boy, the period of uncleanness is seven days; if the child is a girl, it is two weeks. The woman’s state of uncleanness is similar to the uncleanness of the menstrual period (**כימי נדת דותה**), as expounded in Lev 15:19–24, 28–30. During this period, the woman cannot touch anything, or lie or sit upon something, without contaminating it and making it unclean. In both birth and menstruation, it is the flow of blood that puts the woman in a state of uncleanness (Lev 12:7; 15:19).<sup>283</sup> This is the reason

<sup>280</sup> Cf. Kaiser, “*Deus absconditus*,” 83–84; Schmidt, *Exodus 1/1–6/30*, 223; Blum and Blum, “Zippora,” 46–47. Here the phrase is seen as an expression of a heightened connection.

<sup>281</sup> Morgenstern, “Bloody Husband,” 67–70.

<sup>282</sup> Gen 2:23; 29:14; Judg 9:2; 2 Sam 19:13 [12], 14 [13].

<sup>283</sup> John Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 168–69; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 188. It is not the process of giving birth that makes a woman unclean, but the flow of blood that accompanies the birth process.

why after birth and the period of uncleanness, the woman still needs to go through a longer period of blood purification, a regulation that does not apply to the menstrual period. If the child is a boy, the period of purification is thirty-three days, while if it is a girl, the time period is sixty-six days. Presumably, in this second semi-impure period, the woman no longer contaminates what she touches; however, there are some restrictions in that she is not to touch anything holy or enter the sanctuary (12:4–5). At the end of this second period, she is to bring a burnt offering and a sin offering to the priest, who is to offer it to the Lord on her behalf (12:6–8), then “she shall be clean from her flow of blood” (12:7).

Why is the woman’s flow of blood at birth and menstruation considered polluting? One view is that the flow of blood symbolizes death, the antithesis of life.<sup>284</sup> In the case of menstruation, for example, the flow of blood symbolizes the loss of seed and “a missed opportunity for creating life anew.”<sup>285</sup> But if this is the case, why is birth blood considered more polluting (as shown in the long period required for purification) when the woman has produced seed (תוריע) and has not wasted it?<sup>286</sup> Another view is that giving birth is life threatening and thus exposes both the mother and the child to the risk of death.<sup>287</sup> More likely, however, it is not the threat of death itself, but the ambiguous situation of expressing both life and death that is viewed as unclean. Menstrual blood pollutes because it represents a potential for life that is not realized and therefore symbolizes death and the loss of life. Birth blood pollutes because it represents the loss of life, as represented by the flow of blood, in the midst of producing new life. As Gorman puts it:

In the act of giving birth, the mother bodily enters into an ambiguous state between life and death. She brings a new life into the world, but, at the same time, she loses some of her own life through the loss of blood. The woman manifests the loss of life in the act of bringing forth a new

<sup>284</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 188.

<sup>285</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 183; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (see chap. 3, n. 131), 123; Emanuel Feldman, *Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning: Law as Theology* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1977), 35–37. This parallels seminal discharges, which are also considered polluting because they symbolize the loss of life.

<sup>286</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 186.

<sup>287</sup> Hartley, *Leviticus*, 168; Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 249. For a different view altogether, see Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 152–53, who thinks that the origin of the taboo arises from the fear of power, particularly feminine power, associated with the flow of blood.

life. It is the woman's location in this ambiguous state that generates her uncleanness; she holds together in her own body the realm of life and the realm of death.<sup>288</sup>

The structure of the universe, according to Israelite cosmology, is maintained by keeping distinctions and boundaries firm.<sup>289</sup> This view finds expression and focus in the priestly concern for order and for guarding the boundaries between life and death.<sup>290</sup>

When the lines between life and death are blurred, and when there is an impinging of one realm upon the other, impurity results. This impurity is removed only by a ritual act, which may involve a period of separation from the community and/or the sanctuary, ritual washing and bathing, or the offering of sacrifices.<sup>291</sup> These rites of purification or restoration are similar to transition rites in that they move a person or group from one status to another.<sup>292</sup>

It is in light of this that one can understand the significance of the interjection of the rite of circumcision (12:3) in the middle of a passage that talks about the woman's uncleanness at childbirth. At first glance, the verse does not seem to have any relation to the surrounding verses. Milgrom sees it as an editorial parenthesis to emphasize the uniqueness of Israel's rite of circumcision, which, in contrast to Israel's neighbors, is performed on the eighth day.<sup>293</sup> He does not explain, however, why this emphasis is inserted in this context. On the other hand, Eilberg-Schwartz observes rightly that the timing of the circumcision is coordinated with the diminishment of the mother's state of uncleanness. He, however, interprets this as an act that separates the child from the mother's impurity. According to him, the male child, because of his contact with the mother, is also impure, hence the requirement to wait until the eighth day until he can be circumcised.

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<sup>288</sup> Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *Leviticus: Divine Presence and Community* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 78.

<sup>289</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Carol Meyers et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 400.

<sup>290</sup> Gorman, *Leviticus*, 78.

<sup>291</sup> For an extensive discussion of rituals that remove impurity, see David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987).

<sup>292</sup> Frank H. Gorman, Jr., "Priestly Rituals of Founding: Time, Space, and Status," in *History and Interpretation: Essays in Honour of John H. Hayes* (ed. M. Patrick Graham et al.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 48–49.

<sup>293</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 746–47.

A contrast is thus being made between the mother's blood, which is impure, and the blood of the male child spilled in circumcision, which is pure.<sup>294</sup> Circumcision then "is a rite that marks the passage from the impurity of being born of woman to the impurity of life in a community of men."<sup>295</sup> However, apart from the fact that the blood of circumcision is nowhere mentioned in the passage (or in any text regarding circumcision, except, as others claim, in Exod 4:25–26), the concern of this section is not the impurity/purity of the boy, but the uncleanness/cleanness of the mother. There is also no mention of the baby being unclean.<sup>296</sup> The rite of circumcision then should be seen in terms of its function in relation to the mother's uncleanness, not in relation to the impurity of the boy. This is supported by the fact that immediately after the very short reference to circumcision (12:3), the text goes back without pause to giving instructions regarding the mother's state of uncleanness (12:4–8).

I propose that the rite of circumcision here serves to close the mother's initial period of impurity. It functions in the same way as the offering of burnt and sin sacrifices, which closes the second stage of lesser impurity (12:6–8). Circumcision marks the end of one period and the ushering in of a new one. In this particular case, circumcision marks the ending of the previous state of impurity and the beginning of the next stage of lesser impurity. As discussed above, circumcision is an appropriate rite of transition because the act of cutting the foreskin symbolizes both life and death. Nonetheless, even though it deals with both realms, it seeks to communicate an unambiguous message. The circumcision of the son shows that he has passed on from the realm of death into the realm of life. The fact that circumcision is associated with fertility and with God's promise to Abraham of numerous descendants is an affirmation of life and continuity over death and the extinction of the line. Perhaps this is the reason why the birth of a boy is accompanied by a shorter period of uncleanness and blood purification.<sup>297</sup> The performance of the rite of circumcision hastens

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<sup>294</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 174.

<sup>295</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage*, 175.

<sup>296</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 188.

<sup>297</sup> Although no reason is given in the text for the differentiation in the duration of uncleanness and blood purification between the sexes, several views have been proposed. (1) It may reflect an ancient belief that the mother sustains a longer period of postnatal discharge if the child is a female. John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (ConC; St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 267; Wenham, *Leviticus*, 188. (2) It reflects the expectations

the termination of the period of impurity because it helps to establish anew the boundaries between life and death.

דמים then in חתן דמים could symbolize the ambiguity of blood, as expressed in the blood of birth. On one hand, blood represents life; on the other hand, its flow represents the loss of life. The process of birth involves the passage from death to life. Zipporah's family is in a similar precarious and ambiguous situation, straddled as they are between life and death. On one hand, death could await them in Egypt, and Yahweh's attack makes the reality of death palpable and real. On the other hand, there is the promise of life after Egypt, in the land that God promised to Israel's ancestors. Yet to grasp this life necessitates a form of death for the family—a death to their old life, identity, and community—as well as a rebirth in terms of a redefinition of old categories, including Zipporah's relationship to her husband and child. By invoking the marriage relation and by declaring that she has gotten married anew, Zipporah resolves the ambiguity and moves it toward new life for her and her family. At the same time, by drawing attention to her son's circumcised state (the other meaning of חתן), she acknowledges that the rite enables her family to pass from death to life. The genitive then in חתן דמים could be read as a genitive of purpose,<sup>298</sup> a bridegroom for the purpose of resolving the ambiguity associated with blood. On the other hand, the preposition in לִי, aside from indicating a new relationship “a bridegroom of blood to me,” is also to be construed as a preposition of advantage, “a bridegroom of blood for me” or “on my behalf.” The circle then becomes complete. Zipporah initiates the circumcision of her son; the son's circumcision implicates the father and results in his initiation; the father's initiation provides the occasion for Zipporah's introduction into a new relationship, and thus resolves the ambiguous identity of the family.

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and anxieties over the female's potential fertility (Levine, *Leviticus*, 250), which can be an effort to control female sexuality (Gorman, *Leviticus*, 79). (3) It is an attempt to protect the mother and the new-born daughter, who are seen to be more vulnerable than the men. Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 102–103. (4) It expresses the cultic inferiority of the female. See Martin Noth, *Leviticus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 97; cf. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 188, who cites the disparity in the redemption price of the sexes (Lev 27:2–7). Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 751) disagrees with this view, however, since, according to him, greater defilement does not necessarily entail less social value. He cites M. I. Gruber, “Women in the Cult According to the Priestly Code,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (ed. J. Neusner et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 43, n. 13. Cf. Balentine, *Leviticus*, 102.

<sup>298</sup> GKC § 128q.

By performing the rite, Zipporah plays the role of a ritual specialist, the one who administers the rite. Other ritual roles include other participants who may not necessarily be the performer, but are involved in the rite because it is on their behalf that the rite is performed. Another role is the audience, before whom the ritual is performed, and to whom the significance of the rite is communicated.<sup>299</sup> On one level, the rite is performed on behalf of both Moses and the son, both of whom remain passive recipients of the act. On another level, however, the rite is for the whole family, which includes Zipporah and the future generations of her offspring. In an immediate sense, the rite is performed before Yahweh, to communicate that death and separation have taken place, so that the attack could be averted. But the rite also functions to communicate a message to the participants themselves—to Zipporah and to Moses—that a fundamental change has taken place in their lives. Yet this very act of expressing a new state of affairs through the power of ritual is itself the process by which this new state of affairs comes into being.

A question remains, however. Why is the role of circumciser performed by Zipporah? Some commentators portray Moses as incapacitated and unable to move, so that Zipporah has to be the one to circumcise the son.<sup>300</sup> Zipporah's role, however, is more significant than being an emergency stand-in for a task that her husband is unable or unwilling to perform. Ackerman suggests that as a ritual specialist, Zipporah takes the place of her father Jethro, and therefore she performs a priestly function,<sup>301</sup> but Ackerman's interpretation necessitates that circumcision be seen as akin to blood sacrifice, an assumption which I have questioned.<sup>302</sup> I think that Zipporah's peculiar role is better explained in terms of McNutt's marginal mediator.<sup>303</sup> As a marginal person, Zipporah is able to facilitate the transition of Moses and her family into their new identity, status, and community. Better yet, Zipporah can be seen as "midwife" of a new life, in that her action facilitated the rebirth of her husband and family. In this role, she parallels the

<sup>299</sup> Gorman, *Ideology of Ritual*, 35–36.

<sup>300</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 103; Durham, *Exodus*, 58.

<sup>301</sup> Ackerman, "Miriam and Zipporah," 74–75. Cf. Meyers, *Exodus*, 64.

<sup>302</sup> See p. 201.

<sup>303</sup> See p. 182 above, esp. n. 131.

role of the midwives in Exod 1:15–21, who saved the male children of Israel from certain death.<sup>304</sup>

After successfully negotiating the transition, however, Zipporah remains in a marginal position in relation to Israelite society. After being briefly mentioned in Exod 18:2–6, she completely fades from view.<sup>305</sup> In the same way that Zipporah facilitates this transition, Moses is also instrumental in Israel's transition from Egypt to Canaan. Moreover, like Zipporah, he disappears from the scene after Israel successfully reaches Canaan and settles into a landed existence. Perhaps, this indicates the role that marginal persons play when individuals and societies go through a time of transition. Although playing a crucial role in the process, they themselves do not become part of the new structure that their efforts and insights painstakingly bring about.

## THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE NARRATIVE WORLD

### *The Many Possibilities of Moses*

The plot of Exod 4:18–26 goes through such unforeseen and inexplicable twists and turns that it almost overwhelms the coherence of the story. Discordances abound—temporal displacements, ethical and cultural expectations which are subverted, seemingly superfluous repetitions, anonymous characters, confused and ambiguous identities, incomprehensible actions of the deity, concealed or contradictory intentions and actions, narration and speech that use atypical and obscure phrases, and multivalent rites and symbols.

Yet when seen in relation to the larger narrative of Exod 2:23–4:31 it is possible to work out some coherence in the story. When the episode is read through the lens of a transformative liminal experience that would initiate Moses into his sacred vocation and his family into a new relationship, community, and identity, a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” or a “concordant discordance” (in Ricoeur's words) becomes possible. This synthesis is encapsulated in the rite of circumcision with its underlying dynamics of death and rebirth.

<sup>304</sup> See Ilana Pades, “Zipporah and the Struggle for Deliverance,” in *Countertraditions in the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 81–83, who connects Zipporah's action with other women who saved Moses.

<sup>305</sup> There is another possible reference in Num 12:1, to the Cushite woman whom Moses had married. But there are different views on whether this refers to Zipporah or to another wife whom Moses had married after Zipporah.



The plot's dynamic operation of discordance and concordance is reflected in the imaginative variations of the characters themselves, through the dialectic of identity and diversity and the interplay of sameness and selfhood.<sup>306</sup> This is particularly true of the main human character, Moses. Although the characters of Zipporah and the son are crucial to the development of the story, their function in the plot is limited to serving the transition and transformation of Moses into a messenger that would effectively communicate God's message of concern, promise, and intervention to the Israelites, and God's word of warning, judgment, and death threat to Pharaoh. Thus, we find that Moses' character is more developed than that of Zipporah or the son, who remains the passive receiver of the actions and intentions of his parents.

Although there is a temporal totality that draws together the figure of Moses, so that one can identify the same character throughout the story, this unity is threatened by the incident in Exod 4:24–26. The lack of identifying marks such as a name and definite descriptions makes us unsure whether we are following the same character possessing the same physical body with the same mental and corporeal attributes. Thus, the four criteria of identity as sameness, which Ricoeur enumerates, break down.<sup>307</sup> There is lack of clarity as to whether the narrative is speaking of the same person—Moses—which the previous and following episodes talk about (numerical identity). Since there are no identifying marks, we cannot apply the criterion of similarity and resemblance (qualitative identity). Moreover, since there is a clear interruption of continuity (the third criterion), we cannot distinguish a substratum which remains permanent in time (the fourth criterion). The result is an effacement of identity, which is reflected in the heightening of the discordant elements of the plot. The temporal totality of Moses' character is disrupted by an unforeseeable event that obliterates all marks of identity. This dissolution of identity corresponds to the dissolution of the coherence of the narrative plot.

This dissolution of identity and plot, however, opens up a rupture in the text that forces us to go back to earlier incidents in order to follow the story better. The fissure opens up several possibilities regarding what was going on for Moses, providing some clues regarding the nature of the crisis and the formation of identity that take place in this episode.

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<sup>306</sup> See pp. 38, 44–45.

<sup>307</sup> See pp. 41–42.

Thus, we find that, even earlier on, Moses was already experiencing a conflict of identity, loyalties, communities, and vocation.

The most obvious conflict resides in Moses' complex identity: Is he an Egyptian, a Midianite, or an Israelite? Where is his real home? To which community does he belong? With which people should he identify?

On one hand, he is legally an Egyptian. After he was weaned, his home had been an Egyptian household. His appearance was that of an Egyptian. Even though he had to flee Egypt because of his crime, he was not stripped of his Egyptian identity. With the people who wanted to kill him already dead, there is the possibility that he would be able to resume his identity as the son of an Egyptian princess upon his return to Egypt. However, we see earlier on that he did not fully share the Egyptians' perspective, as demonstrated in his taking the side of the Israelites against their Egyptian masters. Moreover, while in Midian, he expressed his feelings of being an outsider in Egypt by naming his son Gershom "an alien there," referring to Egypt.

On the other hand, Moses has married into a Midianite family, which accepted him and provided refuge for him in a time of great danger and need. His wife is a Midianite and his children were born in Midian. As son-in-law to a Midianite priest, he had been an integral part of a Midianite household and had been given the responsibility of shepherding his father-in-law's flock. He was content to dwell in Midian and had not made plans to return to Egypt. But the label "alien" also applied to his sojourn in Midian, for the only way he could continue living in Midian was to be in a dependent relationship with his father-in-law. Since he was not native-born, he did not possess the rights to social protection and privilege, and needed to live under the patronage of someone else.

Although he grew up with the Egyptians and married into the Midianites, his affinity seemed to be with the Hebrews. Moses' ethnicity, after all, was that of a Hebrew. He was born into an Israelite household and his early years were spent there. Yet his description of being "an alien there" in Egypt could apply as much to the Israelite community as it did to the Egyptian community. His "brothers" did not accept him as one of their own. To them, he was an outsider, and they felt no qualms in spreading news about his murder of an Egyptian to others, even though the deed was done on their behalf.<sup>308</sup> Thus, it was not surprising that Moses was not in a hurry to see them again, apart from the fact that to return to Egypt would surely mean death for him.

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<sup>308</sup> Coats, *Moses*, 50.

However, God prodded Moses' memory and reminded him that he was part of a genealogical line that extended back to Israel's ancestors, and this heritage was what defined his identity. As part of an ongoing narrative of God's dealings with Israel as God's people, Moses was heir to the promises to the patriarchs and matriarchs. Nonetheless, as one of the links in the succession of generations, he owes a debt not only to his predecessors, but also to his contemporaries and successors. Thus, he cannot deny his responsibility to his corporate identity. The victims in Egypt are his kin, and remembering their shared heritage meant doing the "duty of memory" which is the "duty of justice."<sup>309</sup>

So Moses remembered "his brothers," and desired to see them again. But his concealment from his father-in-law of the main reason for returning to Egypt suggests that his desire had not yet translated into a long-term commitment. Perhaps he was wondering whether he would be accepted and welcomed. Perhaps he was not sure whether he was ready to embrace the "disgrace of Egypt" (Josh 5:9). Perhaps it would be better to stay in Midian and live a quiet and comfortable life with his wife's family, even though he would never have the rights of the native-born. The work of memory had not taken its full effect for there were many things hindering Moses from assuming a full Israelite identity.

Which identity and direction should Moses choose? To be an Egyptian is to be identified with power but also with the oppressor; to be a Midianite is to be safe and comfortable but it also means being in a dependent relationship and having a low status; to be an Israelite is to be part of the oppressed group, but also a member of the people whom God will liberate and bring into their own land. The first two identities pertain to the here-and-now, while the identity of a liberated people would become a reality only in the future, and thus requires the faith to believe that God can and will bring this about.

The problem of identity is confounded by choices that involve the family. First, there is the choice between the family of orientation (blood relation) and the family of affinity by marriage. Ever since his marriage, Moses had lived with his family of affinity by marriage. His family of procreation (wife and children) is considered to be Midianite. With the return to Egypt, the possibility looms ahead that his family of procreation could be absorbed into his family of orientation. Would his

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<sup>309</sup> See p. 64.

kinfolk accept his foreign wife and sons?<sup>310</sup> Would Zipporah like living among the Israelites? Would she be able to adapt to Hebrew culture and follow Israel's God? Doubts and questions abound.

Then there is the conflict between family and people. Moses' return to Egypt signifies not only a return to his family of orientation, but also a return to his own people. His people, however, are not in an ideal place. They are not in their own land. They have been state guests turned into state slaves. They are in danger of being obliterated by cruel and oppressive policies. Their sufferings have turned into sighs, groans, and moans, but they are powerless to do anything about their situation. Can Moses do something when he had failed before, and in fact had put his own life in danger by trying to help? Why put his life on the line when he was in a good place, with a family, a house to live in, and a steady job? Why risk his family to the uncertainties and dangers of life in Egypt when they are doing so well in Midian, living with relatives they know and love, secure and free from threats to their lives?

Lastly, there is the tension between family and vocation. It was suggested earlier that Moses' family might be more important to him than God's commission. God's call is pulling Moses forward into the future, with its hopes and possibilities, but the needs of his family are pulling him backwards, to familiar and safe territory. Hence, there is a backward and forward movement in the temporality of the narrative.

These possibilities then lie before Moses and threaten to tear him apart, an internal strife that is reflected externally in Yahweh's attempt to kill him. Here we have a person who is facing the anxieties and choices of going home to a place he has never been sure was his home and is not sure would become his home. It is in light of these conflicts that one can interpret Moses' hesitation to accept God's call to deliver Israel. Moses is not sure where he wants to be and what he wants to do. Because it gives an outward form to an internal reality, Yahweh's encounter forces Moses to face up to the struggles that are ripping him apart. The death encounter acts as a catalyst by which Moses' memory is unblocked, so that he could fully acknowledge his identification with the past and future of Israel.

Even though we can more or less recognize the same person that is acting in the different episodes of the story by virtue that he is identified

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<sup>310</sup> In fact, in Num 12:1, Moses' siblings complained about his foreign wife.

by the name of Moses, there are changes to his personality that make us wonder what has happened to make him act differently. In the earlier Moses, we encounter an interventionist who likes to rescue people and correct people's faults. The later Moses, however, is hesitant, indecisive, and doubtful of his own self. He does not seem to be interested in doing anything about the condition of his people back in Egypt. Is this the same Moses who impulsively killed an Egyptian who was not treating his kinfolk fairly? Is this the same man who all of a sudden stepped into a quarrel and tried to correct the one who was in the wrong? Is this the Moses who charmed the daughters of Jethro by defending them from those who wanted to use their physically superior strength to sideline the weaker ones?

Thus, the identity that the narrative constructs for Moses explores both the pole of sameness (*idem*-identity) and the pole of selfhood (*ipse*-identity). On one hand, we see some consistency in character especially in the earlier Moses by his defense of the weak and his desire to correct an injustice.<sup>311</sup> On the other hand, the Moses of the call episode shows a lack of concern for his people's plight, which seems so inconsistent with the earlier Moses. Moses seems to have undergone a personality change, which then leads us to wonder about his identity, understood as sameness.

Moses' narrative identity, as discussed above, is conflicted and contradictory, which is better understood through the definition of identity as selfhood. The crisis of identity reaches a climax in the effacement of identity in Exod 4:24–26. The erasure of the name indicates that things have come to a head. We can no longer recognize Moses, in the same way that Moses can no longer recognize himself. Thus, the character of Moses himself becomes a limit-case, showing dissolution in identity and a self that is “fading away.”<sup>312</sup> This disintegration of identity is accompanied by a breakdown in ethical structures and boundaries, as shown in the lack of clear-cut moral reasons for Yahweh's attack.

The dissolution of identity, however, paves the way for a new identity to take place. Thus, Moses may have changed radically through the years, he may have mixed heritage, and his identity may have nearly been blotted out, but he receives his identity anew. This new identity

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<sup>311</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 41, 44–45; Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father*, 33–34; Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 691–92.

<sup>312</sup> See chap. 2, p. 45.

is based on self-constancy rather than on sameness, on commitment rather than on consistency. This commitment, which constructs a new *ipse*-identity, is expressed concretely and unequivocally through the rite of circumcision.

Nevertheless, the new *ipse*-identity, which is formed by commitment, is not solely, and even primarily, of Moses' doing. Ricoeur makes the point that self-identity is not formed in isolation from the other. The ethical self is not an individualistic self, for it always implies the other. In fact, narrative identity translates into ethical identity through the call of and in relation to the other.<sup>313</sup> The call of God halts the rootlessness of Moses' conflicted self by challenging him to take a definite stand and by summoning him to responsibility. Thus, it is in recognition of God's superior authority and by responding to God's summons that Moses receives a renewed self. It is God's formative activity in preparing Moses for his missional role that forges this new identity.<sup>314</sup>

There are other ways, however, in which the other plays a role in the formation of Moses' identity. This is shown in the way the mediation and participation of the other is crucial in expressing Moses' commitment through the act of circumcision. There are some odd things about this form of commitment. First of all, the act of commitment was performed by Zipporah, and not by Moses. Secondly, the mark of commitment was made on Moses' son, rather than on Moses himself. How can an action done by another person on another one be the basis of the commitment of another? Is not commitment an individual decision, one that realizes the *power-to-do* of an agent who knows himself or herself accountable for his or her actions? But in the episode, Moses is completely passive to the point that his identity is obscured.

One interesting thing about Exod 4:24–26 is that Moses' identity is shown to be bound up with the identity of his son. The identity of the self is bound up with the other. It is only when the identity of the son becomes unambiguous that Moses' identity resurfaces from its submersion. It is the destiny of the son, and consequently, that of the coming generations, that determines who Moses is and will be. The family then becomes the crux in the definition of identity. The family that was the impediment to Moses fully embracing his call is also the same family that is instrumental in bringing it about.

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<sup>313</sup> See p. 51.

<sup>314</sup> Charles Ringma, written comments.

It is in this way then that one can understand the role of Zipporah. Moses, torn by conflicts, his identity effaced, has been paralyzed into passivity. It is the other—Zipporah, the mother, the marginal mediator—who makes a decision on behalf of Moses and of the whole family. Zipporah then is the midwife of Moses' new identity. She provides, in Ricoeur's language, the "solicitude of friendship," which enables Moses to act upon his possibilities. Through the act of commitment made by Zipporah, Moses is able to recognize his own self—who he is and what he should be—and thus regain his sense of identity and calling.

However, there is one "other," who is not a direct participant in the episode, but whose oppressive situation provides the reason and impetus for God's call. This is the suffering other, Israel. Through Yahweh's death threat, Moses may have come to a deeper understanding of God's deep commitment to firstborn Israel. At the same time, the threat to his own family may have made him understand better the threat posed by Pharaoh's oppressive policies to Israel's families. Thus, it may have paved the way toward true sympathy with their plight and solidarity with their suffering.

### *The Possibilities of the Self*

Far from lessening the followability of the story, the gaps presented by the narrative world open up different possibilities for readers to explore through the use of their imagination. As stated earlier, Ricoeur underscores the role of imagination in the way readers try out and play with different possibilities. Through this process, readers realize their "ownmost possibilities," that is, their own limits and powers to act.<sup>315</sup>

In this passage, the self is confronted with the question of its own identity. The exploration of this question becomes possible as the self is confronted with the many possibilities of Moses. Thus, in following Moses' progression from a consistent self, to a conflicted self, to an effaced and disappearing self, and finally to a renewed self, the reader's self is able also to discern its own journey. The temporal flow and breaks of the narrative becomes a mirror to read the temporal progress, tensions, and dislocations of one's own human experience.

Liminality is part of human experience. Times of transition are inevitable in life. The feeling of being betwixt and between may even

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<sup>315</sup> See pp. 34–35.

become the predominant reality to some who no longer remember what it is like to have a settled identity or to belong to a certain people or group; in this case, they become permanently marginal. This is particularly true of migrants. Jung Young Lee links the experience of migrants to being in-between, that is, situated ambivalently between two worlds, absorbing the “repulsions and attractions or the rejection and acceptance of each.”<sup>316</sup>

In the chap. 5, I will explore how the possibilities opened up by the liminal experience in Exod 4:18–26 can illumine and refigure my experience as a Filipino reader of the text, and along with me, other Filipino migrants, who are also grappling with issues of marginality, identity, family, vocation, and community in the midst of life betwixt and between.

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<sup>316</sup> Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 43. See also Phan and Jung, *Journeys at the Margin* (see chap. 3, n. 109).



## CHAPTER FIVE

### REFIGURATION: TRANSFORMING THE READER

In the last chapter, we have seen how the plot mediates between the individual incidents and the story as a whole, between the discordant elements of the story and its concordant features, and between time as succession of events and time as configured reality. We have also seen how the mediations of the plot—its textual configurations—create a narrative world that opens up different possibilities for the characters in the story, and consequently, for the readers of the story. The narrative world projects ethical possibilities that can transform the experience of the readers of the text. The plot then acts as a pivot that transfigures the domain of preexisting reality (prefiguration) into the practical experience of readers (refiguration) through its restructuring function (configuration). In this chapter, we deal with the horizon of the reader. The dynamic process of emplotment—from prefiguration (*mimesis*<sub>1</sub>) to configuration (*mimesis*<sub>2</sub>), and finally, to refiguration (*mimesis*<sub>3</sub>)—is completed by and in the reader, the receiver of the narrated story. Thus, the lived experience that gave birth to the text passes through the grid of a creative and inventive ordering of actions and events to transform the lived experience of the reader of the text.

In the following, I first discuss the way Ricoeur relates the action of refiguration with the act of reading. For refiguration to take place, the effect of the text on the reader must be considered. This effect can be individual or collective. Thus, I describe the effect of Exod 4:18–26 on me as an individual reader of the text, but as part of a projected reading public, the Filipino migrant community. I also deal with the effect of the text on actual reading publics of the past, that of various Jewish and Christian communities in the first millennium C.E. In both sections, I will limit the effect of the text in terms of its ethical appropriation, defining ethics in the way Ricoeur sees it, as the aim of a good life, which is actualized in moral norms.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, I put my reading as a temporary Filipino migrant in interaction with the reading

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 49.

of these Jewish and Christian communities, and suggest ways these readings may inform each other.

#### REFIGURATION OF ACTION AND THE ACT OF READING

Refiguration takes place as the text projects its possibilities onto the readers' practical experience, and as readers explore these possibilities through an act of imagination and appropriation.

Ricoeur links refiguration with the act of reading. Thus, he discusses several theories of reading—from the pole of authorial persuasion, to the inscription of the reading strategy in the literary work itself, and finally the response of the reader as an individual subject or as a community.<sup>2</sup> For Ricoeur, the effect of the text on a receiver is an intrinsic part of the text's meaning.<sup>3</sup> This provides a balance between "the configuration of the text in terms of structure" and "the reader's refiguration in terms of experience."<sup>4</sup> Thus, theories of reading that deal only with the rhetorical strategies of the author, or with the reading strategies of the work itself, are inadequate. Ricoeur disagrees with the view that "the text is a structure in itself and for itself and that reading happens to the text as some extrinsic and contingent event."<sup>5</sup> He asserts, "Without the reader who accompanies it, there is no configuring act at work in the text; and without a reader to appropriate it, there is no world unfolded before the text."<sup>6</sup> Thus, reading strategies that focus only on the prescriptions inscribed in the text itself are limited because they make the reader wholly "the prey and the victim of the strategy worked out by the implied author."<sup>7</sup> So the work of refiguration is not complete until one tackles the response of the reader, that is, "the multiple ways in which a work, in acting on a reader, *affects* that reader."<sup>8</sup>

The effect of a text can be analyzed in terms of the individual reader's response in the process of reading, following Wolfgang Iser's aesthetic theory,<sup>9</sup> or in terms of the reception by the public as a collective whole,

<sup>2</sup> *TN* 3:160.

<sup>3</sup> *TN* 1:77.

<sup>4</sup> *TN* 3:170.

<sup>5</sup> *TN* 3:164.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *TN* 3:166.

<sup>8</sup> *TN* 3:167.

<sup>9</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading* (see chap. 3, n. 68).

as expounded by Robert Jauss.<sup>10</sup> The former deals with the phenomenology of reading, the latter with literary history. Iser differentiates his theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*) from Jauss's theory of reception (*Rezeptionstheorie*) by saying that "a theory of response has its roots in the text; a theory of reception arises from a history of the readers' judgments."<sup>11</sup> A theory of reception then, according to Iser, deals with existing readers, whose historically conditioned judgments are known by their documented responses, whereas the focus of a theory of aesthetic response is the hypothetical reader, upon whom the potential effects of the text can be projected.<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, however, modifies Iser's focus on the hypothetical reader, by emphasizing the response of the actual reader.

### *Phenomenology of Reading*

The starting point of a phenomenology of reading is the presupposition of an incomplete text.<sup>13</sup> From this, Wolfgang Iser developed his concept of the "wandering viewpoint." Ricoeur summarizes what Iser means by this concept: "It expresses the twofold fact that the whole of the text can never be perceived at once and that, placing ourselves within the literary text, we travel with it as our reading progresses."<sup>14</sup> This implies a constant switching of perspectives on the reader's part as well as a continuous process of synthesis or consistency building, which in turn continually changes as past perspectives and expectations are altered throughout every phase of the reading.<sup>15</sup> Thus, there is a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories.<sup>16</sup> "As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the

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<sup>10</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (trans. Timothy Bahti; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (trans. Michael Shaw; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). For a helpful summary and evaluation, see Robert Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, x.

<sup>12</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, 27–28.

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur (*TN* 3:167–68) follows the work of Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and the Theory of Literature* (trans. George Grabowicz; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (trans. Ruth Ann Cowley and Kenneth R. Olson; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> *TN* 3:168.

<sup>15</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, 108–112.

<sup>16</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, 111.

text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, the transformation in the reader is brought about as the reader becomes actively involved in connecting the various perspectives, filling in the gaps, working out the ambiguities by engaging in the clues set forth in the text with the use of creative imagination. “This involvement, or entanglement, is what places us in the ‘presentness’ of the text and what makes the text into a presence for us.”<sup>18</sup>

Ricoeur discusses three dialectic features that “make reading a truly vital experience.”<sup>19</sup> The first moves between being so didactic and transparent that there is no room for the reader’s creativity, and being so obscure and indeterminate that the reader is crushed under the burden of responsibility. Nevertheless, a certain “strategy of frustration” is incorporated into good narratives, in which the reader, whose expectation of a wholly intelligible narrative is thwarted, becomes actively involved in working out this coherence. Thus, reading itself is a drama of discordant concordance.<sup>20</sup> The second moves between a lack of meaning (the first feature) and a surplus of meaning. Every act of reading not only fills up the lacunae, but also brings in an excess of meaning. This makes every text inexhaustible in terms of reading. The third dialectic involves the search for coherence, and moves between familiarization, in which the strategy for coherence is so successful that readers totally lose themselves and live in the “illusion” of the work, and defamiliarization, in which they are struck by the foreignness of the work so that any attempt at coherence becomes unsuccessful. The “right” distance, according to Ricoeur, “is the one from which the illusion is, by turns, irresistible and untenable.”<sup>21</sup>

Ricoeur critiques Iser’s notion of the “implied reader” as the exact counterpart of the “implied author.” Both are literary constructs, “fictional correlates of real beings,” and their identities are constructed from the text itself. According to Iser, the implied reader “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality,

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<sup>17</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, 131.

<sup>19</sup> *TN* 3:169.

<sup>20</sup> *TN* 3:168–69.

<sup>21</sup> *TN* 3:169.

but by the text itself.”<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, however, sees this symmetry between implied author and implied reader as misleading, since, in the interactive process of reading, what is opposite to the implied author is not the implied reader, but the real reader. Whereas the real author disappears into the implied author, the implied reader remains a construction of the text until it is embodied by the real reader. Thus, as has been mentioned before, the act of reading requires a flesh-and-blood reader of the text, and not just an implied reader.<sup>23</sup> Without a real reader, the ethical significance of the text would not be realized since the mimesis of human action would not go outside the text to affect the world of the reader where concrete choices and decisions are made in actual life.

Although Ricoeur sees the interaction of the text and the reader as occurring in the whole mimetic process—from prefiguration to configuration to refiguration—he tends to discuss the effect of the text on the real reader only at the refiguration stage.<sup>24</sup> However, Iser’s notion of gap-filling and coherence-building is already happening even at the configuration stage, and the three dialectic features of reading which Ricoeur sets down are functions of the whole process of emplotment. On the other hand, Ricoeur’s strength is that he does not dissociate the work of refiguration from the act of reading. Thus, the transformation of the reader is not an added movement that takes place after the act of reading is finished, in the fashion of a two-stage interpretation-application dichotomy. Rather, in the process of “completing” the text, the reader becomes “entangled” in the text, and this sets the stage for transformation to take place as the reader “plays” with different possibilities.

By stressing the reader, Ricoeur places himself alongside those who advocate reader-centered approaches to the text.<sup>25</sup> In a phenomenological approach, the individual reader is emphasized. However, although the reader is a unique individual, she or he is not divorced from the social context. As “a member of distinct and identifiable

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<sup>22</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> See p. 105.

<sup>24</sup> This was pointed out by Dan Stiver, email communication.

<sup>25</sup> For an introduction, see Susan R. Suleiman, “Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism,” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3–45; Jane P. Tompkins, “An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism,” in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (ed. Jane P. Tompkins; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), ix–xxvi.

social configurations,” the real reader reads “from and within a social location.”<sup>26</sup>

As the one undertaking this study, I am the real reader of the text. Based on my social location and experience, I am engaged in the process of “completing” the text by filling in gaps, working out ambiguities, creating links, and constructing coherence through the act of explanation and imagination. Below, I will discuss how this process releases a dynamic of transformation so that reading the text becomes transformative for me. In the same way, reading, interacting, and appropriating this text can be transformative for fellow Filipino migrants who are also grappling with issues of marginality, identity, vocation, and return migration.

### *Reception History*

Another way to look at the effect of the text is to look at the meaning succeeding publics attribute to it, in other words, the history of its public reception. To expound on this, Ricoeur discusses the works of Hans Robert Jauss. Jauss looks at a text’s literary history, under the presupposition that “the meaning of a literary work rests upon the dialogical (*dialogisch*) relation established between the work and its public in each age.”<sup>27</sup>

[T]he work lives to the extent that it has influence. Included within the influence of a work is that which is accomplished in the consumption of the work as well as in the work itself. . . . [T]he succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject—through the interaction of author and public.<sup>28</sup>

The work’s history of effects<sup>29</sup> or influence involves “restoring the horizon of expectations,” that is, the “system of references shaped by

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<sup>26</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement,” in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Interpretation in the United States* (ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; 2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 1:58.

<sup>27</sup> *TN* 3:171.

<sup>28</sup> Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 15. Philological understanding, according to Jauss, must remain “related to interpretation that must set as its goal, along with learning about the object, the reflection on and description of the completion of this knowledge as a moment of new understanding” (ibid., 21).

<sup>29</sup> The term “history of effects” or effective-history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is taken from Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 267–74.

earlier traditions,” regarding how to interpret the work.<sup>30</sup> Although not explicitly defined by Jauss, the horizon of expectations may be thought of as “a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text.”<sup>31</sup> It “characterizes the reader’s finite viewpoint amidst his or her situatedness in time and history.”<sup>32</sup> Jauss’s emphasis, however, is not the expectations of the individual reader, but that of historically successive reading publics. These expectations can be literary, that is, shaped by earlier literary works that the reading public is familiar with regarding genre, themes, and the contrast between poetic and practical language. They can also belong to the “wider horizon of experience of life.”<sup>33</sup> Jauss’s contention is that the reading publics of each historical period have different horizons of expectations, and because of this, a literary work’s reception and influence would also vary through the ages.

A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence.<sup>34</sup>

According to Jauss, one can determine the influence of a literary work on a presupposed audience by identifying the aesthetic distance, that is, the disparity between the audience’s horizon of expectations and the given work. Thus, the work can satisfy, surpass, disappoint, or refute the expectations of its audience in a given historical period. He believes that it is possible to objectify this aesthetic distance by looking at the audience’s reactions and the judgments of critics.<sup>35</sup> By tracing the successive aesthetic distances of a work and its audience from the past to the present, one can then write the literary history of a given work.

For Jauss, the aesthetic value of a work depends on how it results in a “‘change of horizons’ through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness.”<sup>36</sup> Holub (rightly) critiques this measure of value since “the

<sup>30</sup> *TN* 3:171.

<sup>31</sup> Holub, *Reception Theory*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons* (see chap. 1, n. 25), 34.

<sup>33</sup> Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 22–24.

<sup>34</sup> Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

distance between horizon and work...is an inadequate criterion for determining literary value."<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, Ricoeur thinks that a literary history of gaps or deviations would be reduced to a history of negativity. He emphasizes that Jauss adds to the ideas of effects and horizon of expectations the logic of question and answer, which Jauss draws from Gadamer and Collingwood: "we can understand a work only if we have understood that to which it responds."<sup>38</sup> Literary history is then the process of "finding the question to which a text offers a reply."<sup>39</sup> Thus, the history of effects has an open character, in that "every work is not only an answer provided to an earlier question but a source of new questions," so that a text's reception cannot be reduced into an atemporal truth.<sup>40</sup>

The value of reception history is that it performs a "historical mediation between the past and the present," or "between the horizon of expectation coming from the past and the horizon of expectation belonging to the present."<sup>41</sup> Through this mediating function, the former and current understandings of the work come into view. Following Gadamer, Jauss shows that past and present understandings, although not identical, are not totally unconnected nor unaffected by each other. As pointed out by Gadamer, our current understanding has a historical character in that it is already influenced by tradition. On the other hand, when we reconstruct the questions of the past to which the text is a response, we are already influenced by the prejudices (*Vorurteile*) of our present situation. A fusion of horizons then occurs—a dynamic and continuous process by which the present is formed by the past and the past is read through the eyes of the present.<sup>42</sup> Reception history then serves to disclose "the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning that is embedded in a work and actualized in the stages of its historical reception."<sup>43</sup>

In this study, I will not tackle the whole reception history of Exod 4:18–26. Rather, in the first part of this chapter, I will concentrate on

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<sup>37</sup> Holub, *Reception Theory*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> *TN* 3:172. Cf. Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 29; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 333.

<sup>39</sup> *TN* 3:174.

<sup>40</sup> *TN* 3:172.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268–74. For an explanation, see Ringma, *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic* (see chap. 2, n. 152), 49–54.

<sup>43</sup> Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 30.



some segments of that reception history in looking at the way some Jewish and Christian communities in the first millennium interpreted and ethically appropriated the text, in order to show how a change in the horizon of expectations affects the kind of questions asked of the text and the kind of answers received. In the second part, I will show how the text can be appropriated by contemporary Filipino migrants. I will then place this ethical appropriation in conversation with the readings of some past Jewish and Christian communities and thus mediate between current and past understandings of the text.

#### ETHICAL POSSIBILITIES IN THE PAST: HISTORY OF PUBLIC RECEPTION

According to Ricoeur, “the text exists...for the use of the community, with a view to giving shape to the community.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, he gives importance to communities of reading and interpretation through which the trajectory of the text, that is, its subsequent refiguration and re-actualization, is realized.<sup>45</sup>

In this section, I set out how different Jewish and Christian voices in the first millennium understood and ethically appropriated Exod 4:18–26. I will look at several classical texts, with the view that the classical is not only a representative of a particular literary genre, but a concept that denotes a historical period.<sup>46</sup>

Since most of these classical texts deal mainly with Exod 4:24–26, I will focus on these verses, although the other verses in Exod 4:18–26 will be included if the writer uses them to make an ethical point. For Jewish interpretations, I will analyze the Septuagint (LXX), the Targums, Jewish Midrashim in *Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. Although the Pentateuch of the LXX was translated prior to the first millennium, I am including it here because it provides the basis for later Jewish and Christian interpretations. For early Christian interpretations and ethical appropriation, I will discuss the following church fathers in the first half of the first millennium:

<sup>44</sup> Lacocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically* (see chap. 1, n. 30), xii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., xi–xv.

<sup>46</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 257. Gadamer sees the classical as mediating between past and present because it provides a certain stability of meaning (*Truth and Method*, 253–58), but Jauss disagrees. For a discussion, see *TN* 3:172.

Origen, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ephrem the Syrian<sup>47</sup> because they deal with the passage directly in their writings.

*The Septuagint: Greek-Speaking Jews in Alexandria (Third Century B.C.E.)*

The term Septuagint (LXX) is used to refer to a range of diverse translations of the Hebrew text into Greek. For our purposes, however, we will concentrate on the Old Greek translation. Although there are various theories of the origins of the LXX,<sup>48</sup> the view taken here is that the Torah was translated around the third century B.C.E. in Alexandria<sup>49</sup> for the Jews of the diaspora who no longer understood the original language of their Scriptures.<sup>50</sup> The translation was produced for liturgical and didactic reasons, for the use of Greek-speaking Jews for synagogue worship and instruction, as indicated by the fact that it did not utilize the literary language of scholars or the Hellenistic writers, but used colloquial Greek, the language of the streets and markets.<sup>51</sup> As a Judaeo-Hellenistic production, the translation reflects the religious and ethical expectations of the Jewish diasporic community in Egypt.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> I am indebted for this section to the works of Géza Vermès and Karen Winslow, which have helped me identify sources and have provided ideas for lines of investigation. See Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition* (see chap. 1, n. 24), 178–92, which is a revised version of his earlier article, “Baptism and Jewish Exegesis” (see chap. 3, n. 29). Karen Winslow’s dissertation, “Framing Zipporah: Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses’ Wife” (see chap. 4, n. 126) traces three trajectories locating Zipporah in relation to Moses in early Jewish and Christian literature: one, as an “outsider” wife (exogamy); two, as a female circumciser; and three, as a wife whose husband practiced continence.

<sup>48</sup> See Natalio Fernández Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Versions of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 53–66, and Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 59–73, for the various theories. The major theories are those of Paul de Lagarde and P. Kahle. For a discussion see, J. W. Wevers, “Proto-Septuagint Studies,” in *Studies in the Septuagint: Origins, Recensions, and Interpretations* (ed. Sidney Jellicoe; New York: KTAV, 1974; repr. *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of T. J. Meek*; Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1964), 138–57.

<sup>49</sup> Jellicoe, *Septuagint and Modern Study*, 29–58; Marcos, *Septuagint in Context*, 40; and Ernst Würtheim, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 51–53. For an account of the circumstances surrounding the beginnings of the Alexandrian Greek Version, see Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 1–28.

<sup>50</sup> The term “Scriptures” here should be understood not as a fixed canon, but as a body of authoritative writings, since there was as yet no fixed canon as we understand it at present.

<sup>51</sup> Swete, *Old Testament in Greek*, 9; Marcos, *Septuagint in Context*, 3–17.

<sup>52</sup> Staffan Olofsson, *The LXX Version: A Guide to the Translation Technique of the Septuagint* (ConBOT 30; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), 1–5.

One way by which the LXX shows a different set of expectations from the community that produced the Massoretic Text (MT) is its rendering of Exod 4:24. Instead of the MT's more direct "the Lord met him and sought to kill him," the LXX has συνήνησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ ἐζήτει αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνειν ("the *angel of the Lord* met him and sought to kill him").<sup>53</sup> The LXX's addition distances the action of killing from the deity, an action that was likely considered shocking and unacceptable.<sup>54</sup> It is interesting that later Greek versions correct the original Greek text to κύριος (Sym. and Theod.) or θεός (Aq.), which shows awareness that the Hebrew text has a different wording.<sup>55</sup>

The LXX also tries to clear up some of the puzzles of the text, although it leaves other details ambiguous as in the MT. The temporal dislocation between 4:18 and 4:19<sup>56</sup> is leveled out by the LXX by inserting a repetition of the phrase from the beginning of 2:23: μετὰ δὲ τὰς ἡμέρας τὰς πολλὰς ἐκείνας ἐτελεύτησεν ὁ βασιλεὺς Αἰγύπτου ("After those many days, the king of Egypt died") before the sentence: "The Lord said to Moses in Midian, Go, depart for Egypt, for all those seeking your life are dead." The insertion serves to show that there was a large time gap between Moses' announcement to his father-in-law of his intention to return to Egypt and his actual departure. In the MT, God's command in v. 19 seems redundant, since Moses had already signified his intention to leave, and has the effect of delaying Moses' departure further.<sup>57</sup> The opposite effect is achieved by the LXX's insertion. Here, God seems to be hurrying Moses. The LXX suggests that Moses delayed his departure until he received an assurance from God that everything was safe in Egypt. This opens up the possibility (although this is not stated by the LXX) that the attack may have been caused by Moses' dilly-dallying.

The LXX retains the ambiguity of the pronouns in 4:24, and the object of the attack can be interpreted as either Moses or his son.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> The Greek text is based on *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum: Vol. II/1, Exodus* (ed. John W. Wevers; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1991). The English translation is mine. The differences from the MT are italicized.

<sup>54</sup> Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, 179. See also John Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 54.

<sup>55</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:442. See also chap. 3, n. 29.

<sup>56</sup> See p. 169.

<sup>57</sup> See p. 169.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Winslow, "Framing Zipporah," 123. This is contra Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, 179, who thinks that the LXX more likely had Moses in mind. In fact, Zipporah's statement in 4:25 (repeated in 4:26)—"The blood of the circumcision of my son has

However, instead of the more picturesque **ותכרת את-ערלת בנה** (“she cut off the foreskin of her son”) in 4:25a of the MT, the LXX uses the more explicit **περιέτεμεν τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς** (“she circumcised the foreskin of her son”),<sup>59</sup> thus losing all the allusions that the verb **כרת** evokes.<sup>60</sup> For the MT’s **ותגע לרגליו** (“she cast it at his feet”), with the referent of the suffix ambiguous, the LXX has **καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας** (“she fell before the feet”),<sup>61</sup> more likely the feet of the angel to whom Zipporah’s subsequent speech was addressed. The gesture can be interpreted as “one of supplication following the performance of a religious rite,”<sup>62</sup> rather than a proof of a new state of affairs, which I have argued is the case with the MT.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, Zipporah’s obscure speech in 4:25b **חתן דמים אתה לי** (“you are a bridegroom of blood to me”) is expanded and modified in the LXX and is rendered as **ἔσται τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου** (“the blood of the circumcision of my son has stood”). In spite of the expansion, the phrase itself is not transparent, since there are different ways of translating the verb **ἵστημι**. As an intransitive, it can mean “to stand, to stop, be confirmed or established.”<sup>64</sup> Vermès translates the whole phrase “the blood of the circumcision of my son *is staunches*,” meaning that the bleeding has stopped, as proof that the blood has been shed and the sacrifice needed for the release of the victim has been performed. He reads the blood as having an expiatory value.<sup>65</sup> Houtman, on the other hand, translates “*here is* the blood of the circumcision of my son,” in which Zipporah directs the angel’s attention to the blood of the circumcision.<sup>66</sup> Both translations, however, assume

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stood”—makes no reference to Moses at all, and can be understood to indicate that it was the son who was attacked, just as it was also the blood of the circumcision of the son that caused the attack to cease.

<sup>59</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>60</sup> See pp. 208–9.

<sup>61</sup> Instead of a causative meaning (*hiphil*) “to cause to fall” or “to throw,” the LXX gives the basic (*qal*) meaning (Dumbrell, “Textual Re-examination,” 288; Wevers, *Notes on Exodus*, 55), although **נָגַג** itself does not mean “to fall” in the *qal* of biblical Hebrew.

<sup>62</sup> Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, 180.

<sup>63</sup> See p. 215.

<sup>64</sup> J. Lust et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2 vols.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992), 1:216.

<sup>65</sup> Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, 180–81. He cites Luke 8:44, the story of the woman whose hemorrhage ceased after Jesus had touched her, for a similar use of **ἵστημι**.

<sup>66</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:441–42.

that “the blood of the circumcision is meant to work reconciliation and to save Moses’ life.”<sup>67</sup>

Although the expiatory function of blood is more muted than what Vermès claims,<sup>68</sup> there is indeed an explicit mention of the “blood of the circumcision” in the LXX, which is not present in the MT. There is also an implicit assumption that there was something remiss, either in Moses’ action or in his son’s uncircumcised state, which had provoked the attack and thus had necessitated the shedding of blood. The significance of the blood is even more emphasized in v. 26, where an explicit causal connection is made between the angel’s departure and Zipporah’s utterance.<sup>69</sup> Instead of the MT’s temporal reiteration וִירָף מִמֶּנּוּ אַז אָמְרָה חַתָּן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת (“Then he fell away from him. At that time, she said, ‘a bridegroom of blood,’ for the circumcisions”), the LXX has καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ διότι εἶπεν ἔστη το αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου (“Then he departed from him, *because* she said: ‘The blood of the circumcision of my son has stood.’”). However, the LXX does not only stress the importance of blood; like the MT, it also shows the importance of Zipporah’s utterance. What led to the angel’s departure and cessation of attack was not only Zipporah’s action of circumcising her son and by that gesture causing an outflow of blood, but also her appeal based on the blood of her son’s circumcision.

The interpretation introduced by the LXX reveals some aspects of the religious and ethical conceptions of the community that produced and read the text. First, it shows the desire to protect God’s reputation by positioning an intermediary between God as the agent, and the violent and contradictory action directed toward God’s servant. Second, it sees the death threat as punishment for sin or a ritual failing on Moses’ part. Third, it gives paramount importance to blood as the only thing that can atone for sin. Hence, the shedding of blood can be made the basis of an appeal for reconciliation and restoration.

<sup>67</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:442.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Winslow, “Framing Zipporah,” 128–29.

<sup>69</sup> Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, 180.

*Targums and Early Rabbinic Literature:  
Palestinian and Babylonian Jews (100 C.E. to 1000 C.E.)*

The Targums and early rabbinic writings defy precise dating because the final redactions of extant documents have undergone several revisions and have incorporated earlier materials and texts, and these in turn have also undergone editing before being re-used.<sup>70</sup> Roughly, however, they can be dated between the second and ninth centuries C.E. Although the Targums are not part of the canon of Jewish rabbinic writings like the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrashim, they are linked with the growth of rabbinic Judaism and they belong to the same general formative period.<sup>71</sup> The rabbis were involved in the translation of the Targums; moreover, as in other rabbinic writings, the Targums employ the process of *midrash*, which paraphrases the original Hebrew and adds fresh materials that seek to clarify the meaning of the text for its audience.<sup>72</sup> Because of these connections, I am discussing the Targums and early rabbinic writings together in this section.

*The Targums: The Atoning Power of Blood*

Whereas the LXX arose out of the need to help Greek-speaking Jews to understand their Scriptures better, the Targums arose because Aramaic had become the official language of the Persian Empire and was soon used for everyday discourse.<sup>73</sup> Like the LXX, the Targums were not

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<sup>70</sup> Günther Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. ed. Markus Bockmuehl; 2d. ed; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 46; Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible: Contents and Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 20–30; Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 21–29.

<sup>71</sup> Paul V. M. Flesher, “The Targumim in the Context of Rabbinic Literature,” in Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 629.

<sup>72</sup> Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 26–27. The term *midrash* can be understood in three ways: (1) as a concrete unit of scriptural exegesis; (2) as a compilation of the results of that process (the Midrashim); and (3) as a process of interpretation (*ibid.*, 9). For a more comprehensive discussion, see Neusner’s *Invitation to Midrash: The Workings of Rabbinic Bible Interpretation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989). For a precise definition and short overview, see Gary Porton, “Rabbinic Midrash,” in *Judaism in Late Antiquity* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 217–36.

<sup>73</sup> The term *targum* was originally applied to any translation of Hebrew into another language, but later on, it became the generic term for all Aramaic translations (Levine, *Aramaic Version*, 9). It is possible that the extant Targum texts, although they have a later dating and are literary in origin, have incorporated some of the earlier oral, as well as written *targumim*, since the Targums contain interpretive materials that are known from other sources to go back to an earlier date. These surviving Targum texts then are witnesses to certain moments of the tradition, seen as an evolving and continuous process, so that one cannot speak of a single Aramaic translation. See Levine, *Aramaic Version*, 10.

literal translations, but explained the text so that it could be understood and appropriated by the different Jewish communities of that time.<sup>74</sup>

There were two major centers of Targum traditions—Babylonia and Palestine. The Palestinian tradition of the Pentateuch survives today in *Targum Neofiti I* (*Tg. Neof.*), the *Fragmentary Targums* (*Fr. Tg.*), and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (*Tg. Ps.-J.*).<sup>75</sup> The Babylonian tradition is represented by *Targum Onqelos* (*Tg. Onq.*), although scholars think that it originated from Palestine, but was revised in Babylon to become the official Targum of the Pentateuch.<sup>76</sup> However, there was much interaction between these two traditions.<sup>77</sup>

As in the LXX, all the extant Targums to the Pentateuch<sup>78</sup> lessen the shock of v. 24 by substituting “angel of the Lord” for the MT’s “the Lord” as the subject of the one who sought to kill Moses. The Palestinian Targums (*Tg. Neof.* and *Tg. Ps.-J.*) take this further and explicitly refer to the angel of God as the “destroyer,” “the angel of death,” or the “destroying angel” in 4:24–25, making the agent of action a step closer to supernatural beings whose task is primarily to obstruct human plans and purposes. Perhaps this reflects the belief that God could not

<sup>74</sup> In a similar fashion to the LXX, the Targums followed the text verse-by-verse; however, they were freer to add explanations and interpretations. John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 3–5.

<sup>75</sup> The *Fr. Tg.*, unlike the other Targums, are not extant portions of complete texts but isolated verses or parts of verses that the redactors preserve in their present form, of which there are four recensions. See Michael Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch According to their Extant Sources* (2 vols.; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 1:12. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is a composite text, although it is believed to be also of Palestinian origin. See Paul V. M. Flesher, “Mapping the Synoptic Palestinian Targums of the Pentateuch,” in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context* (ed. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 247–53.

<sup>76</sup> Levine, *Aramaic Version*, 23; Flesher, “Targumim in Context,” 614–15.

<sup>77</sup> Flesher, “Targumim in Context,” 612–13. Among the Palestinian Targums, *Tg. Neof.* is considered to be the earliest, dating from between the second and fourth centuries C.E. *Targum Onqelos.*, which may have been written in Palestine in the second century, was revised in Babylon before the fourth century, prior to the composition of the Babylonian Talmud. The *Fr. Tg.* were a reaction to the ascendancy of *Tg. Onq.* and may have been intended as interpretative supplements to *Tg. Onq.* (Paul Flesher, “The Targumim,” in Neusner, *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, 47–48). Thus, they would have been written from the fourth century onwards. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is the latest, ranging from the eighth century to the tenth, although it incorporates earlier traditions, but at the same time shows the influence of Talmudic literature. See Flesher, “Targumim in Context,” 613–16. See Stephen A. Kaufman, “Dating the Language of the Palestinian Targums and their Use in the Study of First Century C.E. Texts,” in Beattie and McNamara, *Aramaic Bible*, 118–41.

<sup>78</sup> 4:24 is not extant in the *Fr. Tg.*

possibly be the source of evil,<sup>79</sup> and therefore some other supernatural being must be responsible for the act.

Like the LXX, the Targums also emphasize the importance of the “blood of the circumcision” in warding off the attack. *Targum Onkelos*, the most literal and least expansive, renders 4:25–26 as follows:

25 And Zipporah took a flint-stone and circumcised the foreskin of her son and she *came near (to intercede) before him* (וקריבת לקדמוהי) and said: “By the blood of this circumcision, let the bridegroom be given (back) to us.”  
 26 Then he eased off from him (ונת מניה); after that, she said: “Were it not for the blood of this circumcision, the bridegroom would have been doomed (אתחייב) to death.”<sup>80</sup>

Here, the gesture of supplication is even clearer than in the LXX, as Zipporah is pictured as coming before the attacking angel<sup>81</sup> to plead for the life of the victim by virtue of the blood of the circumcision. Zipporah’s statement in v. 26 makes this more explicit. It is the blood of the circumcision that rescued the victim from the sentence of death. As in the MT and the LXX, the identity of the victim, who is identified with the “bridegroom” (חתנא), is left ambiguous. Although scholars think that it is Moses,<sup>82</sup> there is no explicit indication from the text that this is so.

This is in contrast with *Tg. Neof.*, in which Moses, although not named, is clearly identified as the bridegroom and victim of the attack. Moreover,

<sup>79</sup> In *Jubilees* 48:1–4 (ca. 2nd century B.C.E.), the one who tried to kill Moses on his way to Egypt was identified as Prince Mastema (Satan), whose purpose was to save the Egyptians from the signs and wonders that Moses was going to inflict on them. However, God delivered Moses from the hand of Mastema, so that Moses was able to accomplish God’s act of vengeance against Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The circumcision done by Zipporah is not mentioned in *Jubilees*. See O. S. Wintermute, “Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, (ed. James H. Charlesworth; 2 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 2:139. The other rewritten Bibles—Artapanus, Josephus, Philo, and Pseudo-Philo—also excise the account of the circumcision in their retelling, possibly because it was too troubling or embarrassing for them. For a discussion, see Vermès, “Baptism and Jewish Exegesis,” 314–15, and Winslow, “Framing Zipporah,” 165–66 (Artapanus); 184–87 (Josephus); 187–94 (*Jubilees*); and 198–202, 213–14 (Philo).

<sup>80</sup> I have translated the Aramaic text from Alexander Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic: The Pentateuch According to Targum Onkelos* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1959), 1:94–95, in consultation with the English translation of Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Exodus* (vol. 7 of *The Aramaic Bible*; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1988). The italics show differences from the MT.

<sup>81</sup> In the MT, it is not clear to whom Zipporah’s speech is addressed—Yahweh, Moses, or the son.

<sup>82</sup> Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, 181; Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos*, 13, n. 14.



the reason for the attack is given clearly—Moses failed to circumcise his son. The following verses from *Tg. Neof.* demonstrate this.<sup>83</sup>

25 And Zipporah took a flint-stone and circumcised the foreskin of her son and brought it near<sup>84</sup> the feet (וקרבת לרגליו) of the *destroyer* (מחבלה) and said: “Behold, the bridegroom wanted to circumcise but his father-in-law did not permit him. Now, may the blood of this circumcision atone (כפר) for the sins (חוביו) of this bridegroom. 26 So the angel let go (וארפי מיניה) of him; whereupon, Zipporah gave praise and said: “How precious (חביב) is the blood<sup>85</sup> that has saved (שייב) this bridegroom<sup>86</sup> from the hand of the angel of death.”<sup>87</sup>

*Targum Neofiti* makes it clear that Moses, the bridegroom, was guilty of the sin of not circumcising his son, even though he was merely following the wishes of his father-in-law. This suggests that the Targum gives more importance to ritual obedience than to the wishes of one’s family. By agreeing with his father-in-law, Moses entered into a compromise that endangered his life. Moses’ guilt can only be atoned for by another rite that involves the shedding of the blood of circumcision. Hence, the blood attains an exalted status (Zipporah praises it and calls it precious), which remains muted in the LXX and in *Tg. Onq.* The version of the *Frg. Tg.* does not differ substantially from *Tg. Neof.*<sup>88</sup>

25 And Zipporah took a flint-stone and circumcised the foreskin of her son, and offered it before the feet (ואקריבת יתיה קדם ריגליו) of the *destroyer* and said: “The bridegroom wanted to circumcise but his father-in-law did not permit him. Now, may the blood of this circumcision atone, in order that it might save the bridegroom from the hands of the angel of death.” 26 And he let go. And when the destroyer let go of him, then Zipporah gave praise and said: “How powerful (תקוף) indeed is the blood of this circumcision that has saved the bridegroom from the hands of the angel of death.”

The scene here is even more picturesque. Zipporah lays down the bloody foreskin at the feet of the destroyer as she appeals for her husband’s life based on the blood that has been shed in the circumcision. Her

<sup>83</sup> I have translated the text from Alejandro Díez Macho, *Neophyti I: Targum Palestinense ms de la Biblioteca Vaticana: Exodo* (2 vols.; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1968–79), in consultation with the translation of Martin McNamara and Notes by Robert Hayward, *Targum Neofiti I: Exodus* (vol. 2 of *The Aramaic Bible*; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994).

<sup>84</sup> Neofiti marginal gloss (Nfmg.): “and cast it under the feet of.”

<sup>85</sup> Nfmg.: (blood) of circumcision.

<sup>86</sup> Other recensions have “father-in-law.”

<sup>87</sup> Nfmg.: the destroyer.

<sup>88</sup> *Frg. Tg.* is translated from Klein, *Fragment-Targums*, 1:71. The second volume includes an English translation that I have consulted.

appeal was heeded, as seen in the angel's withdrawal. As in *Tg. Neof.*, the scene ends with Zipporah giving praise for the power of the blood to deliver the bridegroom, identified as Moses, from death.

*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, the most expansive of all the Targums, renders 4:25–26 similarly to *Tg. Neof.* and *Frq. Tg.*, with minor variations.<sup>89</sup> However, it expands 4:24 by explaining why the angel of the Lord wanted to kill Moses.

24 And it happened on the way, at the lodging house, the angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him *on account of Gershom, his son, who had not been circumcised because of Jethro, his father-in-law, who had not given him leave to circumcise him. However, Eliezer had been circumcised, according to the condition that they set between them.*<sup>90</sup>

*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* tries to explain why in 4:19, the text says “Moses took his wife and his sons” and yet only one son was involved in the circumcision scene. The reason is that only one son, Eliezer, had been circumcised. So in 4:25, *Tg. Ps.-J.* clearly identifies whose foreskin was cut: “Zipporah took a flint-stone and cut the foreskin of Gershom, her son.” Furthermore, *Tg. Ps.-J.* explicitly mentions that Zipporah brought the circumcised foreskin to the feet of the destroying angel as proof that the deed had been done, and that blood had been shed.

In summary, as in the LXX, the Targums support the thinking that destructive actions sent by God must be caused by some sin, such as lack of ritual obedience. Moreover, they teach that it is only blood that can atone for this sin. In addition, *Tg. Neof.*, the *Frq. Tg.*, and *Tg. Ps.-J.* show implicitly the dangers of compromise, even if it involves respecting the wishes of someone in authority in the family. The sentence of death fell on Moses because he followed the wishes of his father-in-law not to circumcise his son. Even though it was not what he wanted, he was still made responsible for this omission.

The Targums follow the LXX in giving a prominent place to the blood of circumcision. However, they make more explicit the function

<sup>89</sup> Instead of “the destroyer,” *Tg. Ps.-J.* uses the description “the destroying angel.” It also explicitly says that Zipporah brought the circumcised foreskin to the feet of the destroying angel.

<sup>90</sup> I have translated the text from E. G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV, 1984), in consultation with Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus* (vol. 2 of *The Aramaic Bible*; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994).

of blood as having expiatory value.<sup>91</sup> Zipporah's cryptic statement **חַתַּן דָּמַיִם** in the MT is interpreted as an appeal for clemency in 4:25 based on the shed blood, and as a prayer of praise in 4:26 for the efficacious action of the blood. What saved the victim was not obedience to the command of circumcision, but the atoning power of the blood of circumcision. In addition, aside from showing Zipporah as the performer of the rite, the Targums also emphasize her role as intercessor. Ritual failing then was atoned for by another ritual that involves blood and intercession. This suggests the importance placed on rituals by the communities that produced the Targums. This emphasis on rituals may have been influenced by portions of the First Testament (like Leviticus for instance), which stress the atoning function of blood. On the other hand, the marginal status of the Jewish diasporic community might also have played a role in the importance they gave to rituals.<sup>92</sup>

*Early Rabbinic Literature: The Greatness of the Circumcision*

Like the Targums, rabbinic literature was also produced in Babylonia and Palestine. The earlier collections of Jewish Midrashim, called Tannaitic Midrashim, contain materials from the Tannaitic period<sup>93</sup> (ca. 200–300 c.e.), or earlier. The *Mekilta de Rabbi Israel*,<sup>94</sup> a *midrash* on certain chapters of Exodus, is considered part of these Tannaitic collections, although it has gone through several later revisions.<sup>95</sup>

The Mishnah and the Talmud are structured differently from the Midrashim, which give a comment on a verse or phrase in Scripture. The Mishnah, the principal document of Judaism, does not draw its

<sup>91</sup> It is interesting that even though the idea of the expiatory function of the blood of the circumcision is apparent in the Targums, **וַתִּגַּע** is not translated “and she touched,” but “and she approached,” “brought near” or “cast.”

<sup>92</sup> This was suggested by William Dyrness, written communication.

<sup>93</sup> This is the period of the first generation of rabbis, the teachers of the Mishnah, called *Tannaim*. These rabbis are considered authoritative because they learned and transmitted the teachings through continual oral repetition (Aram. *tanna* or Heb. *shanah* means “to repeat, learn”). The *Tannaim* were followed by the *Amoraim* (Heb. *amar*, “to say, comment”), commentators on the Tannaitic teachings, a period that lasted up to ca. 500. See Stemmerger, *Talmud and Midrash*, 7, and Bowker, *Targums and Rabbinic Literature*, 49, n. 5.

<sup>94</sup> A critical edition with an English translation has been published by Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: JPS, 1933).

<sup>95</sup> Lauterbach thinks that it is one of the oldest Tannaitic collections, although some think that it was written as late as the fourth century. See discussion in Stemmerger, *Talmud and Midrash*, 253–55.

rulings from Scripture, but cites the sayings of rabbis who lived in the first and second centuries. It is supposed to have reached its completion at the end of the second century. It was the basis of the Babylonian and Palestine Talmuds, which are commentaries on the Mishnah. The Palestinian Talmud, also known as the *Yerushalmi*, the Jerusalem Talmud, or the Talmud of the land of Israel, is dated ca. 400 C.E., while the Babylonian Talmud, also known as the *Bavli*, is dated ca. 600 C.E. Although the *Bavli* is later, it occupies a preeminent position in Judaism. In the Mishnah and the two Talmuds, Exod 4:24–26 is alluded to in tractate *Nedarim* (*Ned*).

The *Mekilta* does not include Exodus 4 in the passages on which it chooses to comment. However, portions of Exod 4:18–26 are incorporated in its *midrash* of Exod 18:1–12, which tells of Jethro taking Zipporah and her sons back to Moses after the latter had sent them away. First, the *Mekilta* comments on Exod 4:18: “And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father-in-law.”<sup>96</sup> Moses’ action is seen as a way of giving honor to his father-in-law.<sup>97</sup> Then it ruminates on the reasons why Moses sent Zipporah and their sons away. R. Joshua says that it was because Moses divorced his wife. However, R. Eleazar counters that it was because Aaron objected when he saw Moses with his wife and children.

Aaron said to him: “What (about) the children and women with you?” Moses said to him: “My wife and sons.” Aaron said to him: “Where are you taking them?” Moses said to him: “To Egypt.” Aaron said to him: “We are (already) distraught about the ones who came here earlier, and now are you bringing upon us new ones?” At that moment, Moses said to Zipporah: “Go to your father’s house.” She took her two sons and went. Thus, it is said: “After he had sent her away.”<sup>98</sup>

Aaron’s objection arises from the additional burden that the newcomers would bring to the Israelite community in Egypt. Their hands are already full seeking to meet the needs of those who are already there, without having to worry about the new people that Moses is bringing in.

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<sup>96</sup> The discussion of the *Mekilta* (*Mek.*) is based on my translation of the Hebrew text in Lauterbach, *Mekilta*, in consultation with his English translation and the analytical translation of Jacob Neusner, *Mekhilta According to Rabbi Ishmael: An Analytical Translation* (2 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988). The section divisions are from Lauterbach.

<sup>97</sup> *Mek.* 2:166.

<sup>98</sup> *Mek.* 2:167–68. To make the conversation clearer, I have substituted the name of the one speaking for the masculine singular pronoun.

The *Mekilta* interprets Moses' comment regarding being a stranger in a foreign land as referring to the idolatrous ways of the Midianites. The idolatry is particularly seen in the condition Jethro gave in order for Moses to have Zipporah for a wife.

Jethro said to him (Moses): "You must agree to one thing which I will tell you and I will give her to you for a wife. Moses said to him: "What is it?" Jethro said to him: "The son that you will have first shall be for the service of idols,<sup>99</sup> and from then on, they shall be for the Name of Heaven."<sup>100</sup>

Moses not only agreed, but also swore to Jethro.<sup>101</sup> It is for this reason that the angel tried to kill Moses. As in the LXX and the Targums, the reference to the attacker as the "angel" is also reflected in the *Mekilta* and the two Talmuds. In one instance, the *Bavli* identifies the attacker as Satan instead of the angel.<sup>102</sup> This may express the same sensibility of wanting to avoid a direct attribution of destructive actions to God.

A litany by the rabbis follows, in which they praised the greatness of circumcision. Thus, the rabbis explained the destructive action of the angel toward Moses in relation to the importance given to circumcision. However, the *Mekilta* gives an alternative explanation. The cause of the angel's attack was not Moses' oath to Jethro, but rather Moses' delay in circumcising his son.

Rabbi (Patriarch of Judah) says: "Great is the circumcision, for all the merits of Moses did not serve him at the moment of his distress. He was going to bring Israel out of Egypt, but because he was sluggish about circumcision for one hour the angel sought to kill him; as it is said: "and it happened on the way at the lodging place, etc." (Exod 4:24).<sup>103</sup>

<sup>99</sup> עבודה זרה, lit. "strange (illicit god) service."

<sup>100</sup> *Mek.* 2:168. The Name of Heaven is a euphemistic way of referring to God.

<sup>101</sup> R. Eleazar in the *Mek.* reads the Hebrew משה ויִּשְׁבַּע as "Moses swore" (Lauterbach, 2:169). וִּישְׁבַע is from יָאֵל "to be willing, to be pleased, to be keen," but R. Eleazar reads its root as אָלַה "to utter an oath" (Winslow, "Framing Zipporah," 223, n. 449). Rashi discusses the two meanings in his comments on Exod 2:21.

<sup>102</sup> *b. Ned.32a*: "R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: 'Satan did not seek to slay Moses, but the child.' There is a variant reading, however, that says "angel." Freedman notes that the name Satan was more frequent in the Amoraic period, while infrequent in the Tannaitic literature, so that the variant reading of "angel" may be the original one. See Harry Freedman, *Nedarim* (vol. 3/5 of *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nashim*; ed. Isidore Epstein; London: Soncino, 1936), 94, n. 6.

<sup>103</sup> *Mek.* 2:170.

Another rabbi objects: it was not because Moses was sluggish about performing his duty; rather, Moses was faced with a difficult choice. God had commanded him to go back to Egypt. If he had circumcised the child first and then left immediately, he would have put the child's life in danger. If he had stayed until the child was healed, then he would have been slow in obeying God's command. The problem then was not the lack of obedience of Moses, but it was rather that he occupied himself first with his lodging instead of immediately performing the rite once he reached a stopping place on the way to Egypt. Hence, the angel sought to kill him. Rabbi Simon b. Gamaliel, however, gives another angle. It was not Moses whom the angel sought to kill, but the child. It was the child who was designated bridegroom and not Moses.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, through a conversation among the rabbis, the *Mekilta* provides different ways of filling in the gaps and working out the puzzles of the text.<sup>105</sup> Although no resolution is given among the various interpretations, one major concern still predominates, which is the importance of performing the rite of circumcision. However, the role of blood is not given significance, in contrast to the Targums, and is not even touched on in the discussion of the rabbis. "The redemptive and sacrificial *blood* of the circumcision is replaced by the redemptive *observance* of the law of circumcision."<sup>106</sup>

Nevertheless, there are two opposing traditions in the *Mekilta* concerning Moses' culpability. On the one hand, agreeing with the Targums, Moses is shown to be fully guilty in following the wishes of Jethro, even to the point of agreeing to give over his eldest son to an idol, so that he could have Zipporah for a wife. On the other hand, there is also an attempt to lessen his responsibility since it is explained that he delayed the circumcision of his son out of a desire to obey God by immediately going back to Egypt.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> The *Mekilta* attributed to Rabbi Ishmael is more like a scriptural encyclopedia. It does not seek to argue a single viewpoint or a series of propositions, but rather its purpose is to preserve and compile information that could be used as a basis for constructing a system. Thus, it preserves several viewpoints without an attempt to resolve them. See Jacob Neusner, *Mekhilta According to Rabbi Ishmael: An Introduction to Judaism's first Scriptural Encyclopaedia* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), xi–xvii.

<sup>106</sup> Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, 318. Vermès believes that the emphasis on circumcision arose at the end of the Hadrianic war, when the practice became punishable by death. Hence, Jewish authorities emphasized that parents should not delay in performing the rite.

The Mishnah and the two Talmuds take up the same theme regarding the greatness of circumcision. In a cacophony of voices, the rabbis, one after the other, exclaim, “Great is circumcision” and provide the reason for its greatness by alluding to passages in Scripture. One of these passages refers to Moses. R. Joshua b. Qorha says, “Great is circumcision, for it was not suspended even for a moment for the sake of Moses, the righteous.”<sup>107</sup> In expanding the Mishnah, the two Talmuds incorporate the same traditions that the *Mekilta* includes: Moses’ neglect in performing the rite; the objection that Moses was not neglectful but was faced with a difficult choice between performing the rite and leaving for Egypt as God commanded; the clarification that he was punished for busying himself with affairs in the inn; and the interjection that the victim was not Moses but the child. Moreover, it gives a description of the nature of the attack.

R. Judah b. Bizna lectured, “When Moses was lax in the performance of circumcision, Af and Hemah<sup>108</sup> came and swallowed him up, leaving nought but his legs. Thereupon immediately Zipporah *‘took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son’*; straightway *he let him alone*.<sup>109</sup>

The *Yerushalmi*, on the other hand, expounds more on the identity of the bridegroom as the child.

And Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel said: “Heaven forbid! The angel did not seek to kill Moses, but the child. Come and see: Who was called, ‘groom’? Moses or the baby?” There are Tannaim who teach that Moses was called the groom. There are Tannaim who teach that the child was called the groom. He who said that Moses was called the groom: “A bridegroom of blood” (Exod 4:25) is sought from your hand. And he who said that the child was called groom (Exod 4:25) stands for me. “Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said: “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” (Exod 4:25).<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> *m. Ned.* 3:11.

<sup>108</sup> Af and Hemah are the personifications of anger and wrath.

<sup>109</sup> *b. Ned.* 32a. The translation is from Freedman, *Nedarim*, 94–95. The Jewish Midrashim, *Exodus Rabbah* (ca. 11th–12th c.), expands this: “How did Zipporah know that Moses was in jeopardy because of this delay to perform the circumcision? Because the angel came and swallowed Moses from his head to his circumcised membrum” (*Exod. Rab.* 4.8).

<sup>110</sup> *y. Ned.* 3:9. The translation is from Jacob Neusner, *Nedarim* (vol. 23 of *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*; 36 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 70.

This question naturally leads to the identity of the one whose feet Zipporah touched with the foreskin and who was the addressee of her speech. The meaning of her speech depends then on whose feet the foreskin touched.

R. Judah, R. Nehemiah and rabbis: One said, "It was at the feet of Moses." The next said, "It was at the feet of the angel." The third said, "It was at the feet of the child." He who said that it was at the feet of Moses: "There, that which is a sin for you has been cut away. He who said it was at the feet of the angel: "Lo, you have done your duty." He who said it was at the feet of the child [maintains that] she touched the body of the child.<sup>111</sup>

The Mishnah and the two Talmuds do not mention anything about Moses' acceding to his father-in-law's wishes, like the Targums (except *Tg Onq.*) and the *Mekilta*, nor do they include the tradition that Moses swore to his father-in-law that the eldest son would be dedicated to the idol. The result is a more positive view of Moses, since his only fault was that he got distracted by the need for lodging so that he was not able to circumcise his son immediately; hence the angel (or Satan) attacked him. The effect, however, is to highlight the gravity of delaying circumcision.

In summary, whereas the Targums appropriated the text in terms of giving emphasis to the performance of blood rituals in making right one's relationship to God, early rabbinic literature laid stress on the importance of obeying God's commandments, particularly the command of circumcision. The difference between the two may have arisen as a result of early Christian appropriation of blood rituals in terms of the atoning power of Christ's blood. This may have caused the early rabbis to downplay, and even excise altogether the emphasis on blood as having the power to atone for one's sin. Moreover, the emphasis on circumcision may have also been a reaction to early Christianity's de-emphasis on the role of circumcision as an element in one's relationship with God.

*The Church Fathers:*

*Early Christians in the Third and Fourth Centuries C.E.*

*Origen (Third-Century C.E. Caesarea)*

Origen makes a brief reference to Exod 4:24–26 in *Contra Celsum*, which is dated in the third century (ca. 248 C.E.).<sup>112</sup> Although Origen was

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), xiv–xv.



born in Alexandria in Egypt in 185 c.e., he relocated to Caesarea in Palestine around 230 c.e. There he founded a school, preached, and wrote extensively. From this period came some of his commentaries, his homilies, and *Contra Celsum*. Caesarea was a cosmopolitan city, in which Jewish, Christian, Samaritan, and pagan communities lived together and it was a site of great debates between these different communities.<sup>113</sup> Origen, as part of the Caesarean Christian community, had to deal with the challenges and controversies that arose from the close contact between these groups.

Chadwick describes *Contra Celsum* “as the culmination of the whole apologetic movement of the second and third centuries.”<sup>114</sup> In this work, Origen gives a point-by-point refutation of Celsus, who accused Christianity of corrupting ancient traditions. Celsus was also hostile to Jews, although he considers them as slightly better than Christians. Jews, according to Celsus, still adhered to their own traditions, but Christians had abandoned tradition altogether and had replaced it with dangerous innovations.<sup>115</sup>

Origen’s reference to Exod 4:24–26 appears in Book Five, in which he responds to Celsus’ polemic against the Jews. According to Celsus, Jews pride themselves in being the elect, when actually their customs originated from, and are practiced by, other nations. Referring to circumcision, Celsus says: “Moreover, they would certainly not be holier than other people because they are circumcised; for the Egyptians and Colchians did this before they did.”<sup>116</sup> The response of Origen is to affirm the uniqueness of the Jews, including its practice of circumcision. “The reason for the Jews’ circumcision is not the same as the reason for that of the Egyptian and Colchians, and on this ground the circumcision could not be regarded as identical.”<sup>117</sup> What makes the Jewish practice

<sup>113</sup> N. R. M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish Christian Relations in Third Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 9–12. See also Lee Levine, *Caesarea Under Roman Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 46–47, 61–62, and Paul M. Blowers, “Origen, the Rabbis, and the Bible: Toward a Picture of Judaism and Christianity in Third-Century Caesarea,” in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy* (ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 96–116.

<sup>114</sup> Chadwick, *Origen*, ix.

<sup>115</sup> Chadwick, *Origen*, xvi–xxii. See also de Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, 63–73, for a discussion of Celsus’s points and Origen’s response.

<sup>116</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5:41, henceforth cited as *Cels*. Origen quotes Celsus before making a response point by point. The translation is from Chadwick, *Origen*.

<sup>117</sup> *Cels*. 5:48.

unique is that it is performed on the eighth day, for reasons that Origen does not elaborate, referring the readers to his commentary on Romans. He then suggests that circumcision might have an apotropaic function for Jews,<sup>118</sup> which is seen in the incident in Exod 4:24–26.

Perhaps the command was given because of some angel hostile to the Jewish nation who had power to injure those of them who were not circumcised, but who was powerless against those circumcised. One might say that this is indicated by what is written in Exodus, where the angel had power to act against Moses before the circumcision of Eliazar, but after he was circumcised he could effect nothing. It was because she had learnt this that “Zipporah took a pebble and circumcised” her child, and according to the usual manuscripts she is recorded to have said “the blood of my child’s circumcision is checked”;<sup>119</sup> but according to the Hebrew text: “A bridegroom of blood art thou to me.” For she knew the truth about this angel who had power before the blood was shed and was checked by the blood of the circumcision. That is why she said to him:<sup>120</sup> “A bridegroom of bloodshed art thou to me.”<sup>121</sup>

In Origen’s interpretation, both the command to circumcise, as in rabbinic literature, and the efficacious action of the blood, as in the LXX and the Targums, were emphasized. He, however, does not understand the blood as having a sacrificial/atonement function. Rather, the blood of circumcision rendered the angel powerless, so that the attack was thwarted. A new state of affairs, however, was introduced by the coming of Christ and his subsequent circumcision. The circumcision of Jesus destroyed the angel’s power for all time, which was only temporarily checked by the blood of circumcision. Thus, it was no longer necessary for Christians to be circumcised.

This angel, I believe, had power against those of the people who were not circumcised, and in general against all who worship only the Creator; and he had this power so long as Jesus had not assumed a body. But when he did that, and his body was circumcised, all his power against those who are uncircumcised and who follow this religion was taken away. For Jesus destroyed him by an indescribable divine power. This is why his disciples are forbidden to be circumcised, and why they are told: “If you are circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.”<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Winslow, “Framing Zipporah,” 362–63.

<sup>119</sup> LXX on Exod 4:25.

<sup>120</sup> Origen understands Zipporah’s speech as directed to the angel.

<sup>121</sup> *Cels.* 5:48.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* The quotation is from Gal 5:2.

Through this interpretation, Origen shows that the command of circumcision is no longer necessary, since Christ's circumcision not only fulfilled the function of the original command, but also permanently disabled the capacity of the angel<sup>123</sup> to harm those who are uncircumcised. Thus, one who undergoes circumcision does not partake fully of the benefit of what Christ did. For this reason, it is forbidden for Christ's disciples to be circumcised.

*Augustine (Fourth-Century C.E. North Africa)*

Augustine became Bishop of Hippo in 395 c.e. and in that position battled against the challenges of Manichaeism, Donatism, Pelagianism, and Arianism. In North Africa specifically, Christianity was still flourishing in the fourth century, but was divided into two factions: Roman Catholic and Donatist.<sup>124</sup> Augustine spent much of his prodigious energy in trying to convert Donatists and in working for their unification with the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>125</sup>

Like Origen, Augustine believes that the rite of circumcision has been voided by the coming of Christ. However, according to him, it was not Christ's circumcision that voided the rite, but Christ's death on the cross. Augustine alludes to Exod 4:24 in his letter to Maximinus (392 c.e.), a Donatist bishop of a neighboring church who, he heard, was rebaptizing Christians. He wrote to try to ascertain the facts from Maximinus himself. Augustine considers rebaptism as sin and "one of the worst of crimes."<sup>126</sup> He laments the fact that Christians themselves are destroying the sacrament. In emphasizing the gravity of performing the sacrament of baptism, he equates the rite to circumcision and cites Exod 4:24 to stress his point.

Had I been a Jew in the time of that ancient people, when there was nothing better that I could be, I would undoubtedly have received circumcision. That 'seal of the righteousness which is by faith' was of so great importance in that dispensation before it was abrogated by the Lord's coming, that the angel would have strangled the infant-child of Moses,

<sup>123</sup> Origen does not expound on the nature of the angel and does not refer to it as "the angel of God." He seems to see the angel as having demonic qualities.

<sup>124</sup> For an analysis of fourth-century Donatism in North Africa, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 60–75.

<sup>125</sup> Frend, *Donatist Church*, 228.

<sup>126</sup> *Letters of St. Augustine* 23.2 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 1:242).

had not the child's mother, seizing a stone, circumcised the child, and by this sacrament averted impending death.<sup>127</sup>

Augustine describes circumcision as the "seal of the righteousness which is by faith" and accords it great power since it was able to ward off the angel's attack on the son of Moses. Augustine follows Jewish and Christian tradition in attributing the attack to an angel, and follows the tradition that the victim of the attack was the child and not Moses. He does not explain, however, why the child was attacked. He also does not make any reference to the "blood of the circumcision," although, like Origen, he sees circumcision as having an apotropaic function.

For Augustine, circumcision has been voided by the coming of Christ and his death on the cross and has been replaced by the sacrament of baptism. But even baptism will also be done away with at the second coming of Christ. Only what these two rites prefigure will remain—the circumcision of the heart and the cleansing of conscience.<sup>128</sup> The two rites then, although different and effective at different periods (i.e., before the coming of Christ and after his coming), basically point to the same thing—the inner transformation of the person.

After identifying baptism with circumcision, Augustine goes on to argue that just as there is only one circumcision, there is also one baptism. Just as one could not repeat circumcision because there is only one member, one cannot repeat baptism because there is only one heart. "Ye, therefore, who wish to baptize twice, must seek as subjects of such double baptism men who have double hearts."<sup>129</sup>

The substitution of circumcision by baptism is even clearer in Augustine's letter to Faustus (400 C.E.).

Accordingly, when you ask why a Christian is not circumcised if Christ came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it, my reply is, that a Christian is not circumcised precisely for this reason, that what was prefigured by circumcision is fulfilled in Christ. Circumcision was the type of the removal of our fleshly nature, which was fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, and which the sacrament of baptism teaches us to look forward to in our own resurrection. The sacrament of the new life is not wholly discontinued, for our resurrection from the dead is still to come; but this sacrament has been improved by the substitution of baptism for circumcision, because now a pattern of the eternal life which is to come

<sup>127</sup> *Letters* 23.4 (*NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 1:243).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

is afforded us in the resurrection of Christ, whereas formerly there was nothing of the kind.<sup>130</sup>

Augustine sees circumcision as a prefiguration of a new life, because it involves separation from one's fleshly nature. This prefiguration, however, has been fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, so that there is no longer any need for circumcision. Thus, the rite of circumcision is replaced by baptism, which also prefigures new life in the resurrection of the dead. Augustine then sees a parallel between circumcision and baptism in that both express the death of the old nature and its resurrection into new life.

In arguing for infant baptism, Augustine again uses circumcision as a parallel rite that supports such practice. In *De baptismo contra Donatistas* (400 c.e.), he says, "[W]e can form a true conjecture of the value of the sacrament of baptism in the case of infants, from the parallel of circumcision, which was received by God's earlier people, and before receiving which Abraham was justified."<sup>131</sup> Augustine sees circumcision as the seal of faith, in that Abraham received it after he was justified. But then if circumcision is the seal of faith, he asks, "Why, therefore, was it commanded him that he should circumcise every male child in order on the eighth day, though it could not yet believe with the heart, that it should be counted unto it for righteousness?"<sup>132</sup> The reason is that the sacrament of circumcision itself is of "great avail," as can be seen in the incident in Exod 4:24–26.

And this was made manifest by the message of an angel in the case of Moses' son; for when he was carried by his mother, being yet uncircumcised, it was required, by manifest present peril, that he should be circumcised, and when this was done the danger of death was removed.<sup>133</sup>

Circumcision then protected the child from peril. The seal of the righteousness of faith can come first, according to Augustine, as in the case of Isaac, who was circumcised on the eighth day, "and afterwards, as he imitated the faith of his father, the righteousness itself followed as he grew up, of which the seal had been given before when he was an infant."<sup>134</sup> Augustine then concludes, "[S]o in infants, who are baptized,

<sup>130</sup> *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 19.9 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 4:242–43).

<sup>131</sup> *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 4.24–32 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 4:461).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

the sacrament of regeneration is given first, and if they maintain a Christian piety, conversion also in the heart will follow, of which the mysterious sign had gone before in the outward body.”<sup>135</sup>

In summary, Augustine appropriates Exod 4:24–26 to teach the importance of baptism and the acceptable ways it should be undertaken. Although circumcision was the seal of faith before Christ came, and protected a child from peril, the rite was voided by the coming of Christ and his death on the cross, and was replaced by baptism. Nevertheless, both circumcision and baptism are sacraments of the new life and prefigure the resurrection from the dead.

*Gregory of Nyssa (Fourth-Century C.E. Asia Minor)*

Gregory of Nyssa, one of the famed Cappadocian fathers, lived at a time when Christians were trying to grapple with the relationship of Christian doctrine and Hellenistic philosophy. As more converts came from Gentile and educated backgrounds, the question arose whether the gospel could become more meaningful to them by using the ideas of Plato and others in the Greek classical tradition. Could there be a marriage between faith and philosophy? Some, like Tertullian, were opposed to the alliance. Others, like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, were more disposed to see philosophy as an ally rather than a threat.<sup>136</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa’s attitude toward secular learning was more complex. On one hand, he saw its usefulness and his writings were influenced by Plato’s ideas;<sup>137</sup> on the other hand, he also saw its dangers and imperfections.<sup>138</sup> Thus, he advocates the deployment of philosophy for the gospel only after the former is purged of its harmful elements. This position is seen clearly in his work on the life of Moses, which was probably written toward the end of Gregory’s life (390/395 C.E.).<sup>139</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6–11. On Origen’s use of philosophy, see Jean Daniélou, *Origen* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 75–98.

<sup>137</sup> See Harold Fredrik Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1930).

<sup>138</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Grégoire de Nysse: la vie de Moïse* (SC; Paris: Cerf, 2000), 1 bis: 31–38, henceforth cited as SC 1; Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (CWS; New York: Paulist, 1978), 3–5; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (3 vols.; Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950–60), 3:283–85.

<sup>139</sup> Herbert Musurillo, “Notes on the Texts,” in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writing* (trans. ed. Herbert Musurillo; intro. Jean Daniélou; New York: Scribner, 1961), 289.

Gregory, following Alexandrian exegetical tradition,<sup>140</sup> divides his work, *Life of Moses*, into two parts.<sup>141</sup> The first part is *historia*, the “literal interpretation” and the second part is *theoria* in which he gives the “spiritual interpretation” of the first part.<sup>142</sup> The stated intention of the work is to draw an example of virtue from the life of Moses. According to Gregory, the daily lives of biblical figures are laid out in detail so that “by imitating those earlier examples of right action those who follow them may conduct their lives for good.”<sup>143</sup> But how can one imitate someone whose circumstances in life are far removed from the present situation? According to Gregory, one needs spiritual understanding so as to discern from the history of the individual characters how to “embark on the blessed life.”<sup>144</sup>

Let us put forth Moses as our example for life in our treatise. first we shall go through in outline his life as we have learned it from the divine Scriptures. Then we shall seek out the spiritual understanding which corresponds to the history in order to obtain suggestions of virtue. Through such understanding we may come to know the perfect life for men.<sup>145</sup>

Thus in Book 1, the *historia*, Gregory gives his own summary of the events in Moses’ return to Egypt.

Moses went down to Egypt and he took with him his foreign wife and the children she had borne him. Scripture says that an angel encountered him and threatened him with death. His wife appeased the angel by the blood of the child’s circumcision.<sup>146</sup>

Gregory follows Jewish tradition in attributing the threat of death to an angel. He also follows the Targums and the LXX in their emphasis on the blood of circumcision. Zipporah is given a main role, in contrast to the *Mekilta* and the Talmuds, in appeasing the angel by her action. However, Gregory emphasizes the foreignness of Moses’ wife and

<sup>140</sup> Malherbe and Ferguson, *Moses*, 5–9.

<sup>141</sup> Gregory follows Philo, who also wrote a two-part life of Moses. Philo, *De Vita Moses* 1, 2 (11 vols. trans.; F. H. Colson; LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), 6:274–595.

<sup>142</sup> For the patristic technique of *historia* and *theoria*, see H. Musurillo, “History and Symbol: A Study of Form in Early Christian Literature,” *TS* 18 (1957): 357–86.

<sup>143</sup> SC 1:1.13. The English translation is by Malherbe and Ferguson, *Moses*, 32, henceforth cited as Malherbe. Malherbe and Ferguson follow the section numbers of Daniélou, SC 1, a critical edition of the Greek text with a French translation.

<sup>144</sup> SC 1:1.14 (Malherbe, 33).

<sup>145</sup> SC 1:1.15 (Malherbe, 33).

<sup>146</sup> SC 1:1.22 (Malherbe, 35).

children. The reason for this emphasis becomes clearer in Book II, the “spiritual interpretation,” in which Gregory identifies “foreignness” with pagan learning.<sup>147</sup> According to him, philosophy has its place in the life of virtue, provided that the product of such union does not result in “foreign defilement.”

The foreign wife will follow him, for there are certain things derived from profane education which should not be rejected when we propose to give birth to virtue. Indeed moral and natural philosophy may become at certain times a comrade, friend, and companion of life to the higher way, provided that the offspring of this union introduce nothing of a foreign defilement.<sup>148</sup>

It was for this reason that the angel threatened Moses’ son, according to Gregory, because the child still had the foreskin, the mark of a foreigner. The son’s circumcision was necessary to cut off what was “hurtful and impure.”

Since his son had not been circumcised so as to cut off completely everything hurtful and impure, the angel who met them brought the fear of death. His wife appeased the angel when she presented her offspring as pure by completely removing that mark by which the foreigner was known.<sup>149</sup>

Gregory then goes on to equate the wrong notions of pagan philosophy with uncircumcision—“there is something fleshly and uncircumcised in what is taught by philosophy’s generative faculty”<sup>150</sup>—which must be circumcised or purged in order for the good to remain. He cites an example:

For example, pagan philosophy says that the soul is immortal. This is a pious offspring. But it also says that souls pass from bodies to bodies and are changed from a rational to an irrational nature. This is a fleshly and alien foreskin.<sup>151</sup>

He then concludes:

[O]ne could describe in some detail how good doctrines are contaminated by profane philosophy’s absurd additions. When these are completely

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<sup>147</sup> Gregory allegorizes Moses’ living with a foreigner (referring to Jethro, although not named by Gregory) as associating with profane wisdom (SC 1:2.13; Malherbe, 58).

<sup>148</sup> SC 1:2.37 (Malherbe, 62–63).

<sup>149</sup> SC 1:2.38 (Malherbe, 63).

<sup>150</sup> SC 1:2.39 (Malherbe, 63).

<sup>151</sup> SC 1:2.40 (Malherbe, 63).



removed, the angel of God comes to us in mercy, as if rejoicing in the true offspring of these doctrines.<sup>152</sup>

Thus, in Gregory's allegorical interpretation, the uncircumcised state of Moses' son represents the uncritical combination of pagan philosophies and the Christian faith, which can be harmful to a life of virtue. Without denigrating the value of pagan learning, he nonetheless believes that it should be "circumcised," that is, purged from anything harmful and impure, before it could be utilized. Thus, the purpose of the angel's attack is to ensure that these contaminating foreign elements are removed, so what is left is pure doctrine. When this happens, the angel of God comes not as a threat, but rather as a merciful and joyful presence.

*Ephrem the Syrian (Fourth Century C.E. Syria)*

Although biographies have been written about Ephrem the Syrian, much of the material has been drawn from legends and from spurious documents purported to be written by Ephrem.<sup>153</sup> The best-known tradition is that Ephrem was a monk and a hermit, who lived in the mountains and the desert and founded the monastic movement in Syria. Modern scholarship, however, has questioned this traditional image of Ephrem, based on a critical study of his genuine works. What emerges is one "who is visibly and actively engaged in the teaching and preserving of orthodoxy of the lay church community."<sup>154</sup> Although not formally a monk, he lived a consecrated life<sup>155</sup> and practiced celibacy.

What is undisputed is his vast influence in Syrian Christian literature and culture. He, together with his older contemporary Aphrahat, are considered the two fathers of the Syrian church. The early Syrian church was characterized by strong ascetical tendencies,<sup>156</sup> which it regarded as a continuation of the discipleship of Christ and the apostles.<sup>157</sup> Ephrem and Aphrahat belonged to a premonastic order

<sup>152</sup> SC 1:2.41 (Malherbe, 63).

<sup>153</sup> For a biographical list and an evaluation, see Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works* (FC; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 91:12–20, henceforth cited as FC 91.

<sup>154</sup> FC 91:23.

<sup>155</sup> Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (rev. ed.; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 17.

<sup>156</sup> FC 91:11–12.

<sup>157</sup> Robert Murray, "The Features of the Earliest Christian Asceticism," in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp* (ed. Peter Brooks; London: SCM, 1975),

known as the *Bnay Qyāma* (Sons of the Covenant), whose members lived at home or in small groups, rather than in monasteries or in the wilderness. Their vows, which were taken during baptism, included sexual renunciation. Celibacy was expressed in two ways, through virginity (*btuluta*) or through holiness or consecration (*qaddiṣuta*), a technical term used for voluntary abstinence from marital intercourse.<sup>158</sup>

Because Ephrem wrote in Syriac before the time when the Syriac church had become strongly hellenized, he “is a representative of Semitic-Asian Christianity in its as yet unhellenized-uneuropenized form.”<sup>159</sup> Ephrem was a prolific writer of poems, commentaries, and homilies.<sup>160</sup> His commentary on Exodus was probably written in the last ten years of his life. He died in 373 C.E.

Ephrem’s interpretation follows the Peshitta in Exod 4:24 in attributing the attack to the Lord rather than to the “angel of the Lord,” in contrast to the LXX, the Targums, and early rabbinic literature. Later on in his explanations, however, he shifts his terminology and refers to the attacker as “the angel.”<sup>161</sup> He shares with the Palestinian Targums the identification of the victim as Moses, and thus does not share the ambiguity of the MT, the LXX, and *Tg Onq*. He also uses the same tradition as *Tg Ps.-J.* and the *Mekilta* in the reason he gives for the attack: Moses did not circumcise one of his sons.<sup>162</sup> The surprising twist, however, is that it was not Jethro who constrained Moses to circumcise only one of his sons, but Zipporah (Sephora in Syriac).

So he married Sephora who bore him two sons. He circumcised one of them, but she did not let him circumcise the other one. She was strong-willed because of her father and brothers. She may have consented to become Moses’ wife, but she had not consented to become a daughter of

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68–70; “The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (ed. Nina Garsoian et al.; Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 6–9.

<sup>158</sup> Murray, “Syriac Christianity,” 6–7; “Christian Asceticism,” 72.

<sup>159</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 15.

<sup>160</sup> For a discussion, see FC 91:37–45.

<sup>161</sup> In his comments on the burning bush incident, Ephrem explains that God appeared to Moses by means of an angel. See R. M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii* (CSCO; Louvain: L. Durbercq, 1955), 71:3.1 (FC 91:231), henceforth cited as CSCO 71.

<sup>162</sup> The links between Ephrem and the Palestinian Targums on this text is discussed by Antoine Guillaumont, “Un Midrash d’Exode 4, 24–26 chez Aphraate et Ephrem de Nisibe,” in *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature in Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East* (ed. Robert H. Fischer; Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology, 1977), 89–95. Like the Targums, Ephrem employs Jewish *midrash* in his interpretation.

his faith. She was a daughter of priests who was brought up on sacrificial meat, and who was accustomed to worshipping many gods. So she did not give him both of them [to circumcise], but neither did she withhold both of them. She gave one, so that the circumcision of Abraham would continue in him, but she withheld the other, through whom the uncircumcision of her father's house would be passed down.<sup>163</sup>

Zipporah was concerned that the coming generations would not preserve the religious traditions of her family and of her husband. Thus, she wanted each of her sons to have a different religious faith. One would be circumcised and would continue the traditions of Abraham; the other would remain uncircumcised and would maintain her father's faith. Ephrem recasts the conflict in terms of family tensions arising from differences in faith. Zipporah is portrayed as a strong-willed woman who prevented Moses from doing what God wanted him to do—circumcise all their sons.

Ephrem's Moses is not portrayed as a dilly-dallying messenger, who did not want to return to Egypt and help his fellow Israelites. In his comments on the call of Moses, Ephrem excludes the account in which Moses asked the Lord to send someone else, resulting in God's anger and the appointment of Aaron as spokesperson (4:13–16). Moses, according to Ephrem, was genuinely concerned about the welfare of his family and the Israelites. In his retelling of 4:18, Ephrem says, "Moses returned to Midian and told his father-in-law that he was going to see if he had caused his brothers in Egypt any suffering as a result of his separation from them."<sup>164</sup>

The marital tensions between Zipporah and Moses reached a climax on that fateful night when the Lord tried to kill Moses. Ephrem interprets the story in the following way:

At the place where they were spending the night, the Lord came upon Moses, and wanted to kill him, because he had discontinued circumcision in Midian for one of his sons who had not been circumcised. From the day [the Lord] spoke with him on Horeb, he had not been united to his wife, who was distressed; and she was under judgment because she had not put full faith in his word. [Moses] blamed her for keeping his son from being circumcised. They spent the night [preoccupied] with these thoughts. Suddenly, an angel appeared for both of these reasons, while seeming to appear only because of circumcision.

<sup>163</sup> CSCO 71:2.8 (FC 91:230).

<sup>164</sup> CSCO 71:4.3 (FC 91:234).

[The angel] appeared to Moses in anger so that his departure [from Midian] would not be ridiculed because he had discontinued circumcision without necessity, while the Hebrews had not interrupted it in spite of the death of their children. Now whom should he have feared, God, who prescribed circumcision or his wife, who had stood in the way of circumcision?<sup>165</sup>

It is not clear why Zipporah was distressed, whose judgment she was under, and what the phrase “she had not put full faith in his word” means. What is clear though is that the couple had not had sexual relations since the Lord had commissioned Moses on Horeb. Zipporah might have been distressed because of this, or because her husband was not pleased with her. Moses, it seems, had become more conscious of his religious failing after the Lord had appeared to him, and had blamed his wife for the situation. The angel’s appearance then was intended to resolve their marital problem. Moreover, Ephrem explains that because Moses had not circumcised his son, he would be ridiculed when he got back to Egypt because his fellow Hebrews continued the practice even under threat of death, while Moses discontinued it just because he was afraid of his wife. Hence, the angel appeared to him in anger, threatening to kill him, to drive home the point that it was God who should be feared, and not his wife.

At the threat of death, Zipporah realized her folly and did what was required—she circumcised her son. As in the Targums, the appeal was addressed to the angel. In contrast to the Targums, however, she based her appeal not on the blood of the circumcision, but on the commandment that had been kept.

When Moses’ wife saw that he was about to die because she had stood in the way of circumcision, about which and on account of which he had argued with her that evening, *she took a piece of flint*, and still trembling from the vision of the angel, *circumcised her son*, letting him be spattered with his [own] blood. Then she held the angel’s feet and said: “*I have a husband of blood*. Do not cause suffering on the day of the celebration of circumcision.” Because there was great joy on the day Abraham circumcised Isaac, she said: “I too have a husband of blood. If you do not [refrain from harm] on account of me, who circumcised my son with my own hands, or on account of Moses, refrain on account of the commandment of circumcision itself which has been observed.”<sup>166</sup>

<sup>165</sup> CSCO 71:4.4 (FC 91:234–35).

<sup>166</sup> CSCO 71:4.4 (FC 91:235–36). The emphasis is from the translators and reflects the biblical text.

The angel's departure provided an occasion for Moses to rebuke his wife.

When [the angel] left, Moses took the opportunity to say to Sephora: "If you were so afraid of [the angel] who had appeared to you for a single moment how much more should I be fearful and *sanctify* myself for God, who is visible to me all the time, and who worked wonders through me, and who has sent me, armed with this staff, to deliver six hundred thousand?<sup>167</sup>

The word "sanctify" (*qdash*), a verbal form of *qaddiṣuta*, is used by Moses (in Ephrem's words) to explain to his wife why he had withdrawn from sexual relations after God had called him. Zipporah had only experienced a single encounter and she was already afraid. Moses, however, was seeing God all the time, and thus had more reason to be afraid. This echoes Exod 19:10–15, in which the people were commanded to prepare themselves for their encounter with God by consecrating themselves through washing their clothes and abstaining from sexual relations.

After the incident, Moses returned Zipporah to Midian for two reasons: first, the rest of the journey would be uncomfortable for the son who had just been circumcised; and second, the rest of the Israelites were already leaving Egypt, so it did not make sense for Zipporah and her sons to go there. However, in Ephrem's comments on Exodus 18, he makes no mention of the return of Zipporah and her sons to Moses, although he gives an account of Jethro's visit and his conversion to becoming a disciple. Zipporah and her sons remained permanently separated from Moses.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, in one of his hymns, Ephrem declares that Zipporah also kept sanctity, meaning that she also abstained from sexual relations.

Moses, who divided and separated himself from his wife, divided the sea before the harlot. Zipporah though daughter of a heathen *kept sanctity*: with a calf the daughter of Abraham went a whoring.<sup>169</sup>

In summary, Ephrem appropriates Exod 4:18–26 toward giving emphasis to putting God's commandments and call above family desires, even if the family member involved is one's marital partner. Moreover, he

<sup>167</sup> CSCO 71:4.4 (FC 91:236). Emphasis mine.

<sup>168</sup> Winslow, "Framing Zipporah," 321.

<sup>169</sup> *Hymns on the Nativity* 9 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 13:244). Emphasis mine. Zipporah is contrasted with Israel, who worshipped the golden calf (Exod 32:1–6).

uses it to support the practice of sexual abstinence within marriage as part of one's dedication to God. Ephrem, however, is not negative about marriage, as can be seen from his interpretation of Moses' marriage to Zipporah as an act of divine providence.<sup>170</sup> However, he shares his community's perspective that full consecration to God involves sexual abstinence and he interprets the biblical text in this light.<sup>171</sup>

*Summary: Early Christian Appropriation of Exodus 4:18–26*

All the early church fathers discussed above, except Ephrem (in one instance when he quotes Scripture), stand in the Jewish tradition of referring to the attacker as the "angel," instead of "the Lord." Thus, the shock of Exod 4:24 is lessened as the action is attributed to God only indirectly, and sometimes not at all. It seems that both Jews and Christians in the first millennium share the same horizon in relation to their view of God. God could not have been directly responsible for a violent deed against God's chosen. Having relegated the violent action to an angel, the church fathers no longer saw the text as ethically problematic, and thus the attack did not merit further discussion.

What became the focus of their attention is the meaning of circumcision, and how Zipporah's action of circumcising her child can be significant for their communities. Among the church fathers discussed above, Origen stands closest to the interpretation of the LXX, the Targums, and rabbinic literature in giving importance to the blood of circumcision and the command to circumcise. He, like Augustine, sees the rite as having an apotropaic function and, again similar to Augustine, thinks that the rite has been voided by the coming of Christ, and therefore, need no longer be practiced by Christians. Origen, however, does not propose a substitute for circumcision in his interpretation of this passage, in contrast to Augustine. Augustine believes that baptism functions in the same way as circumcision. Like circumcision, baptism

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<sup>170</sup> Ephrem's comments on Exod 2:21 reads: "When the priest sent after him, he knew that the One who rescued him from death in the river by means of Pharaoh's daughter, and likewise let him slip through Pharaoh's hands and escape from under Pharaoh's eyes, put it in the mind of the priest to take Moses in, and make him his daughter's husband." (FC 91:229).

<sup>171</sup> Ephrem's near contemporary, Aphrahat, shares Ephrem's perspective. Aphrahat though is less sympathetic to Zipporah, seeing her as "the woman who advised him (Moses) to shameful acts," so that the Lord met Moses and tried to kill him. The attack only ceased when Moses decided to send his wife back to Midian. See Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 6.3 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 13:635). For a discussion, see Winslow, "Framing Zipporah," 292–97.

acts as the seal of faith, prefigures the new life in its symbolism of death and resurrection, and protects the child (in the case of infant baptism) from spiritual peril until his or her conversion at the time of maturity.

In Gregory, circumcision takes on a more symbolic meaning. For Gregory, the uncircumcised state of Moses and Zipporah's son represents the uncritical combination of secular learning and Christian doctrine, so that what is produced is contaminated and destructive to the Christian faith. In order for philosophy to be used in the service of the gospel, the former must be purged first of its harmful and impure elements, as symbolized in the rite of circumcision, in which the act of cutting the foreskin represents the removal of all that is foreign and impure.

Ephrem reads the omission of circumcision as an indication that family affairs have taken precedence over God's affairs. Conversely, its performance shows one's total dedication to God, and this is expressed in putting God above family and marriage, even to the point of withdrawing from marital sexual relations for God's sake.

The above account of a segment of the reception history of Exod 4:24–26 shows how a community's horizon of expectations influences the way it interpreted and ethically appropriated the text. The text receives a different configuration, depending on the community's horizon, and this in turn results in a different refiguration. However, although there are dissimilarities, there are also connections and links, which indicate some continuity in tradition in the readings discussed above.

From the ethical appropriations of the past, I will now turn to a possible ethical appropriation of the text in the present, within the Filipino migrant community.

#### ETHICAL POSSIBILITIES IN THE PRESENT: TRANSFIGURING THE FILIPINO MIGRANT EXPERIENCE

In chap. 3, I discussed several aspects of my experience as a Filipino reader of the text that have links with the prefigured actions in the text. Thus, there are the actions of farewell and leave-taking, migration, attack on a traveler, and circumcision. I showed how these actions are ethically evaluated in Filipino culture. I also communicated a sense of affinity with some, and a puzzle with others, regarding how these actions

are symbolically understood and ethically evaluated in the world of the First Testament. These actions, however, were treated in a disjointed way and were not brought together in a story.

However, the configurations of the narrative, as unfolded in chap. 4, link these various actions together and augment, narrow down, and modify their significances, thereby opening up possibilities that can refigure the practical experience of the reader. The actions are linked through a temporal movement that produces an interplay of succession and configuration, so that different temporalities come into focus. By following the temporal movement of the narrative, readers receive a new configuration of their temporal experience. Through the different action threads woven by the narrative onto the temporal fabric, human actions that are seen as fragmented or only vaguely related acquire new meanings as they are brought together, intensified, and augmented to produce an enlarged vision and deepened understanding of reality.

In this section, I focus on the marginalization of Filipino migrants and explore ways by which the movement from marginality to liminality in Exod 4:18–26 can transform the migrants' experience. It must be kept in mind, however, that the text does not only refigure the experience of the reader. The text also receives a new configuration as it is read intentionally through the eyes of a Filipino migrant. Thus, although I have traced the configuration of Exod 4:18–26 in chap. 4, this configuration continues to be refined and amplified in this chapter as it is brought in conversation with the actual experiences and stories of Filipino migrants.

Filipino migrants comprise a broad group of people that can be classified in several ways. According to areas of deployment, the largest group goes to the United States and its territories, the second to East and South Asia (Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore), the third group to the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar), and the remainder to Europe (mostly UK and Italy), Oceania, and Africa. According to type of occupation, the largest group consists of manual and service workers (which includes domestic and hotel workers), then professional and technical workers (which includes those in the medical field such as nurses and doctors), followed by production workers, and those involved in clerical, sales, agricultural and other types of work.<sup>172</sup> According to the permanency of stay in the host country,

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<sup>172</sup> Rosalinda Dimapilis-Baldoz, "The Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) Phe-



there are two broad groupings. Permanent residents include immigrants-now-citizens, second and third generation Filipinos who were born in the host country, immigrant spouses, and people with resident status. Most of these reside in North America and are called *balikbayan* (back to the nation) when they visit the Philippines.<sup>173</sup> Temporary residents include contract workers, students, transnationals moving back and forth between the Philippines and the host country (e.g., workers of international agencies), and undocumented migrants. According to the Philippine government definition, the term Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs) strictly applies only to those “who work on a temporary basis which is defined in contracts of employment and who have the intention to return after the completion of their contracts.”<sup>174</sup> However, since many Filipinos abroad, including those who have become permanent residents of their host country, send money regularly to their families in the Philippines, a more encompassing term is now currently used, which is Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).

There is then a rich diversity of stories and experiences among Filipino migrants, which means a multiplicity of personal and narrative identities as well. “[M]any Filipinos have overlapping and simultaneous identities that necessitate different paradigms for identity, nationalism, and authenticity.”<sup>175</sup> “There is no universal ‘migrant’ experience. Rather, experiences away from a homeland are contingent upon local conditions.”<sup>176</sup> Despite this fact, it is still possible to speak of a shared identity, since Filipino migrants share the same geographical origin and national history. Moreover, regardless of where they are situated, they all experience various forms of discrimination and marginalization.<sup>177</sup> At the same time, most of them are compelled to migrate because of the desire for economic and social advancement.<sup>178</sup> For my purposes, I

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nomenon,” in *Scattered: The Filipino Global Presence* (ed. Luis Pantoja Jr. et al.; Manila, Philippines: LifeChange Publishing, 2004), 38–41.

<sup>173</sup> Amador Remigio, “A Demographic Survey of the Filipino Diaspora,” in Pantoja et al., *Scattered*, 18.

<sup>174</sup> Dimapilis-Baldoz, “OFW Phenomenon,” 37.

<sup>175</sup> Maria P. P. Root, *Filipino Americans: Transformation and Identity* (ed. Maria P. P. Root; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997), xiv.

<sup>176</sup> James A. Tyner and Olaf Kuhle, “Pan-National Identities: Representations of the Philippine Diaspora on the World Wide Web,” *APV* 41 (Dec 2000): 234. Available online: Business Source Premier Database, <http://search.epnet.com>.

<sup>177</sup> Tyner and Kuhle, “Pan-National Identities,” 239.

<sup>178</sup> Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr., “The Dialectics of Transnational Shame and National Identity,” *PhilSocRev* 44 (1996): 124.

will primarily address first-generation migrants, whether permanent or temporary residents of their host countries. first-generation migrants still retain their ties with relatives and friends in the Philippines and are more likely to visit, send remittances, and keep up with the news in the Philippines.

In the following construction, I am not employing a hermeneutics of correlation, but a hermeneutics of possibility.<sup>179</sup> I do not try to engage in a one-to-one correspondence between the text and the situation of Filipino migrants. Rather, I imaginatively explore the possibilities of this segment in Moses' story for links that would evoke and inform the experiences of Filipinos working and living overseas. The text then is suggestive rather than prescriptive. It acts as a resource for the shaping of a narrative identity which, when acted upon in response to the call of the other, leads to an ethical identity.<sup>180</sup>

### *Migration, Marginalization, and the Loss of Identity*

As expounded in chap. 3, migration in the Filipino world symbolizes opportunity and hope, but also dislocation, alienation, loss of status, and family fragmentation. In the First Testament world, migration also has positive and negative connotations, since it is linked with issues of economic survival, protection from death threats and a new beginning, but also with being oppressed and marginalized, being away from family, and being disconnected from the good that God has intended, as symbolized in the gift of the land.<sup>181</sup> In the early chapters of Exodus, however, the focus is on the marginal experience of migrants. On one hand, there is the account of Israelite migrants who were seen as threats to the security of their host society, and were therefore subjected to different forms of ethnic cleansing and subjugation: harsh policies for population control, state labor, and direct and indirect genocide. On the other hand, there is the depiction of Moses in Midian, who described himself as a "stranger," and whose life as a shepherd in a foreign land was hidden and invisible. These two pictures capture the general experience of Filipinos who migrate to other lands. They provide a point of connection between the experiences of the characters of the story

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<sup>179</sup> The terms are from Charles Ringma.

<sup>180</sup> See p. 51.

<sup>181</sup> See pp. 120–22.

and the experience of the readers of the story and thus make possible the transfiguration of action in the readers' world.

The experience of Moses in Midian highlights the sense of alienation and dislocation connected with being a migrant. By using גר as a self-description, Moses acknowledges his marginal, dependent, and less privileged status as a foreigner living among the native-born inhabitants of Midian. The word also highlights his sense of still being an outsider, despite his marriage to a Midianite and his membership by affinity in a Midianite household.

Frank Spina proposes that an appropriate translation for גר is "immigrant" since, like an immigrant, a גר is a person from another tribe, city, or country who must place himself or herself in a dependent relationship with someone else in the host country because he or she does not enjoy the customary rights or privileges.<sup>182</sup> Moreover, the word "immigrant" calls attention to the original circumstances that impelled the move to a more favorable social setting—circumstances like social, political, and economic pressures and upheavals. In the case of Moses, his relocation to Midian was due to political pressure—a threat to his life. In the case of Filipino migrants, their relocation to another country is necessitated primarily by economic and social pressures. In my case, my temporary migration as a post-graduate student is not primarily caused by economic pressures; nevertheless, it does involve the desire and necessity for a more favorable setting for study.<sup>183</sup>

As a temporary migrant living in the United States, I have experienced being marginal and marginalized. Indeed, if I were to summarize my five years of living in the U.S.A., I would say that it has been characterized by the pain of a marginal existence. In the Philippines, I was recognized and my gifts were welcomed and received with appreciation, but I have been largely invisible to public life in the United States and have had very little opportunity to serve and contribute. Part of this has to do with the demands of Ph.D. studies, which made it difficult for me to take on other time-consuming activities. But a great deal of it has to do with my being a foreign student, struggling with culture and language, and coming from a different set of experiences to those brought up in North American culture. In many social gatherings I

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<sup>182</sup> Spina, "Israelites as *gerim*" (see chap. 4, n. 39), 323, citing W. R. Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (New York: Meridian, 1956), 75.

<sup>183</sup> When I left in 2000, there were no institutions in the Philippines offering post-graduate work in First Testament studies.

attended, I remained, for the most part, voiceless and unnoticed. People around me talked about themselves, their issues, their viewpoints, but it was difficult for me to enter into the conversation. Since I was operating in a second language, it took time for me to put my ideas into words, and by the time I was ready to speak the discussion had moved on.

Sadly, my church experience has not been that different, even though I have attended at various times a multicultural church and an Asian-American church. Although I am Asian, I am not American-born, and unlike most migrants, I have no intention of staying permanently in the United States. Since I have had no part in the formation of the church and have no place in its organizational structure, my spiritual gifts and extensive ministry experience in the Philippines have remained largely ignored and unutilized. Once, when I offered to pray for people who came forward seeking help, I was refused because I was not part of the church leadership. This made me feel negated and disempowered.

Seminary was only a little different. My academic work was well received and recognized, although I had a hard time participating orally in class. However, in terms of the school's community life, I was peripheral. I often felt that I was invisible, and I could disappear with very few people noticing that I was gone. Thus, I could resonate with Moses in the story who says that he has been a stranger in a foreign land. I too have been a stranger and have known how it feels to be at the margins, excluded, voiceless, and disempowered.

Many Filipino migrants have had the same experience of invisibility and feelings of insignificance. Indeed, despite the fact that Filipinos are the second largest Asian migrant population in the United States,<sup>184</sup> and form the biggest migrant workers' group in many parts of the world, they are largely invisible in public life.<sup>185</sup> They play an insignificant role in the shaping of public discourse and public policy. They are described as "forgotten," "a minority within a minority,"<sup>186</sup> making

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<sup>184</sup> Pauline Agbayani-Siewert and Linda Revilla, "Filipino Americans," in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues* (ed. Pyong Gap Min; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1995), 134.

<sup>185</sup> E. San Juan, Jr., *From Exile to Diaspora: Versions of the Filipino Experience in the United States* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998), 56–57. See also Jonathan Y. Okamura, *Imagining the Filipino American Diaspora: Transnational Relations, Identities, and Communities* (New York: Garland, 1998), 31–58, who describes Filipino Americans as the "marginalized minority."

<sup>186</sup> Fred Cordova, "The Filipino-American: There's Always an Identity Crisis," in *Asian Americans: Psychological Perspectives* (ed. Stanley Sue and Nathaniel N. Wagner; Palo Alto, Calif.: Science & Behavior Books, 1973), 136. See also Nathaniel N. Wagner, "Filipinos: A Minority within a Minority," in the same volume, 295–98.

their status doubly marginal. If one is an undocumented immigrant, one becomes doubly invisible, living in the shadows without any papers, benefits, or rights.<sup>187</sup>

The majority of Filipino migrants have had to take on menial low-wage and low-status jobs even though they have college degrees and professional backgrounds in the Philippines. For instance, of the fifty percent of migrants who are women, two-thirds are employed in domestic service, which means they are paid to provide elderly care, childcare, and/or housecleaning in private homes.<sup>188</sup> Many of these women have attained high levels of education and have their own domestic worker to take care of their children in the Philippines. But they disappear into the caverns of other people's homes, hospitals, nursing homes, and retirement centers and are only seen again in public on their day-off. It is not surprising that when they do emerge, they try to be as visible as possible. Some wear attention-getting, even gaudy, clothes to make their presence known. In Hong Kong, on Sundays, hundreds of Filipino domestic workers congregate and fill Statue Square in Central District. Their festive presence had so alarmed and threatened the Chinese public that, in the early 90s, calls were made to prohibit them from occupying the space or to move them "out of sight."<sup>189</sup> However, these attempts to push the domestic workers out of visible social life failed as "thousands of domestic workers continued to gather in Central on Sundays, laughing, talking, and eating en masse. They demanded to be seen and they refused to be moved."<sup>190</sup>

Marginality, then, in the Filipino migrant experience is equated with invisibility. It is to be like Moses in Midian, hidden in the wilderness, involved in the task of taking care of somebody else's sheep, invisible to public life.

The pain of marginality for migrants, however, is made more acute by being regarded as mere instruments of policy and by being subjected to ethnic, economic, and social differentiation. Migrant workers are seen as mere objects to advance the interests of both the country of destination and the country of origin, without regard to the personal and family fragmentation and disempowerment that this produces. Jane Margold describes how male Filipino workers in the Middle East live

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<sup>187</sup> See Concepcion A. Montoya, "Living in the Shadows: The Undocumented Immigrant Experience of Filipinos," in Root, *Transformation and Identity*, 112–20.

<sup>188</sup> Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization* (see chap. 3, n. 103), 1.

<sup>189</sup> Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1–6.

<sup>190</sup> Constable, *Maid to Order*, 7.

a subaltern existence—desexualized, dehumanized, and silenced—by the rapid turnover of workers, the tight restrictions on time and space to maximize productivity, the treatment of employers which refer to them as “dogs,” “tools,” and “slaves,” the hierarchy of difference which considers Asians as lower than Euro-Americans and Arabs, and the lack of institutional means for redress.<sup>191</sup> This reduction to “body instrumentality and body parts” leads to “a disintegrating sense of self and the dismemberment of their masculinity.”<sup>192</sup> On the other hand, those who work as domestic workers are vulnerable to abuse since, as live-in workers, they are dependent on their employers and have no private spaces of their own or complete control of their time. As foreigners who are employed in jobs on the lowest rung of the economic and social ladder, they are also subject to racial and social prejudice. Moreover, as temporary residents, they do not have adequate legal and civil rights to protect them from being dominated and exploited.<sup>193</sup>

Marginality as a subaltern existence parallels more the subjugation of the Israelites in Egypt who, as migrants and state slaves, were subjected to ethnic discrimination and regarded as tools of Egyptian state expansion. Thus, it needs the invisibility of Moses and the subalternity of the Israelites in Egypt to capture fully the marginalized experience of Filipino migrants.

The ambivalence in the text, however, as expressed in the name of Gershom (“an alien there”; Exod 2:22),<sup>194</sup> connects the sense of alienation not only with Moses’ experience in Midian, but also with his experience in Egypt, among the Egyptians and his fellow Israelites. Thus, the experience of being marginal does not arise only from being an immigrant and a minority in a foreign land. It also springs from a certain lack of identity. As expounded in chap. 4, Moses is placed in a position where he does not know whether to identify himself with the Egyptians, the Midianites, or the Israelites. By linking together migration, alienation, marginality, and loss of identity in the character of Moses, the story makes it possible for Filipino readers to explore similar themes in relation to their migrant experience.

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<sup>191</sup> Jane A. Margold, “Narratives of Masculinity and Transnational Migration: Filipino Workers in the Middle East,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 274–98.

<sup>192</sup> Margold, “Narratives of Masculinity,” 275.

<sup>193</sup> See Constable, *Maid to Order*, 83–111.

<sup>194</sup> See p. 162.

The loss of identity connected to immigration has received attention by theologian Jung Young Lee.<sup>195</sup> Drawing from the classical definition of marginality, Lee describes marginal people as poised ambivalently between two worlds. “They belong neither to the people of their lineage nor to the people of their residence.”<sup>196</sup> Thus, they are rejected and marginalized by both. In their case, the loss of identity is caused by migration. They are living permanently within the culture of their Western host country, but their physical features and some of their traditions betray their non-Western ethnicity. On the other hand, they are physically disconnected from the land of their ethnicity and the impact of their new environment has changed them to the extent that they can no longer belong to their former culture and community. Thus, their identity is lost between two worlds.

Lee, however, proposes a more positive view of marginality, which is “in-both” in addition to being “in-between.” This view of marginality affirms one’s roots and ethnicity, but at the same time affirms that one is part of the host society. Instead of belonging to neither, one belongs to both.<sup>197</sup> “A marginal person is in-both worlds without giving up either one.”<sup>198</sup> From the negative aspect of being “in-between” and the positive aspect of being “in-both,” Lee constructs a new definition of marginality which is “in-beyond.” In this new construction, “the negative experience of being in-between is also the positive experience of being in-both.”<sup>199</sup> Lee’s goal then is to show a way by which migrants can be integrated into their host society and still retain their marginality and their distinct ethnicity. For Lee, marginality is equated with plurality.

Although Lee is right to give attention to the positive aspect of belongingness to two or more cultures at the same time, he does not sufficiently stress the conflict and tension that this situation produces. In a situation in which one group dominates and exerts excessive power over others, which group then should one identify with—the exploiter or the exploited? Lee tends to gloss over power issues in his definition of marginality. Thus, the pain of being marginal is somewhat eased in Lee’s harmonious and neat construction. Everybody, in some sense, becomes marginal vis-à-vis other groups. This can become an excuse

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<sup>195</sup> Lee, *Marginality* (see chap. 4, n. 315).

<sup>196</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 44.

<sup>197</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 47–53.

<sup>198</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 58.

<sup>199</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 59.

to neglect the truly marginal ones in society, those who, by virtue of their circumstances or other people's unjust actions, have been forced out of the mainstream of political, social, and economic life.<sup>200</sup> This is especially true of the low-wage, low-status migrant worker, whose stay at first may be temporary, and who therefore does not fit in well within the established social structures.

In addition, Lee constructs his definition based on the experiences of immigrants from Northeast Asia<sup>201</sup>—Japan, China, Korea—countries which did not have a long colonial experience with the United States, and whose economies have not been crippled by a dependency on the colonial economy.<sup>202</sup> He takes pride in the fact that the economies of these countries have developed to the extent that they are now on par with or even better than the United States, and this becomes the basis for a new relationship of equality.<sup>203</sup> His basis of equality then is dependent on how the home economy performs; in that sense, he shares the North American value of defining identity in economic terms. If this is the case, how about migrants from countries whose economy remains weak, such as the Philippines? Are they to be treated on less equal terms? Lee's construction of marginality, therefore, does not fit the over-all Filipino migrant experience.

For Filipino migrants, the lack of a strong identity is not caused by migration, but is intensified by it. In some sense, this parallels the journey of Moses whose confused identity existed prior to migration, but it was only when his first son was born that he was able to articulate this internal conflict. The lack of a strong identity among Filipinos may be partly attributed to strong racial, tribal, regional, and religious identities that threaten to overwhelm and fragment the fragile national identity. Thus, group identity becomes paramount over national identity, as people see themselves as belonging primarily to their own particular group (Ilocano, Bisaya, Chinese Filipino, Muslim Filipino, etc.) rather

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<sup>200</sup> San Juan (*Exile to Diaspora*, 68) criticizes this notion of pluralism because it conceals "the contradictions and conflicts of interests in society." He says: "Through postmodernist articulations of formal differences without substantive changes in the structure of power, it seeks to impose a unity of all groups (sexual, racial, economic); achieving a temporary harmony of all by marginalizing the dissidents and neutralizing the unfit or deviant, it maintains the hegemony of a particular constellation of groups or interests who benefit from the status quo" (ibid.).

<sup>201</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 29.

<sup>202</sup> San Juan, *Exile to Diaspora*, 57.

<sup>203</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 48.



than to the nation as a whole. Moreover, the Philippines' peculiar history has resulted in an amalgamation of cultures and races.<sup>204</sup>

The Filipinos' confused identity, however, is due largely to our colonial experience—three hundred years under Spain and half a century under the United States. This has left a huge imprint on the Filipino psyche, leading to the “inferiorizing” of the Filipino—an attitude of deference and worth toward what is foreign, while exercising a mixture of self-hatred and shame toward what is considered local.<sup>205</sup> This attitude, more commonly known as “colonial mentality,” covers the range of personal appearance (the whiter the skin, the taller the nose and the stature, the more beautiful one is),<sup>206</sup> commodities (“Made in the USA” or in other more developed countries is better than “Made in the Philippines”), and even one's educational and occupational environment (to study and work abroad is better than studying and working in the Philippines). Hence, the long-term effect of colonialism itself becomes one of the reasons for the mass departure of Filipinos, particularly for Western countries whose culture, values, economy, and lifestyle are considered to be superior. The colonial mentality has resulted in different life expectations, becoming specifically consumer-oriented toward American products.<sup>207</sup>

However, even the possession of “colonial mentality” becomes an opportunity for self-flagellation as Filipinos deride themselves for giving greater value to what is foreign, thus participating in the classic sense of “blaming the victim.” One author who has made a study of school textbooks and “we” statements in the editorials of Philippine newspapers noted “the sheer frequency and quantity of negative evaluations of self and country” in these writings, and attributed this to the fact that Filipinos measure themselves by American idealized standards, even though this was imposed on a local culture that finds such standards dissonant.<sup>208</sup>

One of the major means by which the internalization of the colonial experience has been inculcated among Filipinos is through the

<sup>204</sup> Root, *Transformation and Identity*, xiii.

<sup>205</sup> Nilda Rimonte, “Colonialism's Legacy: The Inferiorizing of the Filipino,” in Root, *Transformation and Identity*, 41–42.

<sup>206</sup> Maria P. P. Root, “Contemporary Mixed-Heritage Filipino Americans: Fighting Colonized Identities,” in Root, *Transformation and Identity*, 81–82.

<sup>207</sup> Antonio J. A. Pido, *The Pilipinos in America: Macro/Micro Dimensions of Immigration and Integration* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1986), 49–62; Niels Mulder, “Filipino Images of the Nation,” *PhilStud* 45 (1997): 53.

<sup>208</sup> Mulder, “Filipino Images,” 50, 66–67.

manipulation of the collective memory through historical narratives that glorify the achievements and contributions of the colonial power, while diminishing the capabilities of the local community.<sup>209</sup> In these narratives, the colonizers are portrayed as sources of progress and civilization, and the ones who bring education, science and technology, cultural advancements, and Christianity to the local inhabitants. The colonized, on the other hand, are shown to be uncivilized and ignorant, lacking in cultural graces, and needing the help of the colonizers in order to attain development. The past then is remembered through the eyes of the colonizers and the victims are forgotten simply because they are not seen as victims but as privileged beneficiaries of the gifts and goodness of the colonizers.

The result of this manipulated and ideologized memory for Filipinos is a collective identity that continues to be beholden to its Western colonizers, and which sees itself as incapable of charting its own future without the aid and expertise of the West.

Since the colonizing power sees the colonized people as an extension of the colonial sphere and as existing for its benefit, the latter is not allowed to have an identity of its own without reference to the colonizing power.<sup>210</sup> This perspective becomes internalized among colonized peoples to the extent that they think they are not as good as the colonizing power or would never be good without the colonizing power.<sup>211</sup> “Filipinos see themselves in the comparative perspective of the eternal underdog who feel they have to explain themselves, to apologize vis-à-vis outsiders.”<sup>212</sup> The result is a disempowered people, in which the *power-to-do*, which is essential to personal and ethical identity, is significantly diminished.<sup>213</sup> In the Philippine experience, this has produced “a confused people who in their pathetic search for identity look to an idealized indigenous past and to the Hispanized culture of their colonial forbears and who in their desire to solve the problems of the present, dream of a future anchored on Western concepts and values.”<sup>214</sup>

<sup>209</sup> See pp. 63–64.

<sup>210</sup> The name Philippines itself is an anglicized form of the original name given by Spain, *Las Islas Filipinas*, which was based on the name of Spain’s monarch, Felipe II.

<sup>211</sup> See Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 30–32, 49–52 and Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon, 1967).

<sup>212</sup> Mulder, “Filipino Images,” 69.

<sup>213</sup> See p. 50.

<sup>214</sup> Renato Constantino, *Identity and Consciousness: The Philippine Experience* (Quezon City: Malaya Books, 1974), 1.

Indeed, the destructive effects of colonialism on Filipino identity have been likened to the psychological damage caused by abuse,<sup>215</sup> resulting in blocked collective memory.<sup>216</sup> Thus, instead of recognizing the damage done to them as victims and engaging in the work of recollection and mourning,<sup>217</sup> Filipinos “act out” the past by blaming themselves and identifying with their aggressors.<sup>218</sup> Even the attempts to rewrite the nation’s history to do justice to the victims of colonization<sup>219</sup> have not diminished the feelings of indebtedness and inferiority toward the colonial masters, which has shaped Filipino identity for such a long time.

Migrant Filipinos bring this confused sense of identity with them when they go overseas. Their doubly marginal status is confounded by feelings of love and hate for their country and ethnicity.

I was born a Filipino. That may seem like an easy statement to make, but even as I write it, I am amazed at the embarrassment I used to feel. Ever since my parents brought me to the United States, I had been ashamed of who I am, and ashamed of my nation.<sup>220</sup>

I was taught to look outside the indigenous culture for inspiration, taught that the label “Made in the USA” meant automatic superiority; in other words, like most colonized individuals, I was taught a negative image of myself.<sup>221</sup>

Moses’ confused sense of identity is different from that of many Filipino migrants, for he has been able to escape the violence done to his own people by growing up in an Egyptian household. Did he ever feel shame for his ethnic roots and desire to be identified with the Egyptians? Did he ever wish that he was not born an Israelite, that he was indeed the son of Pharaoh’s daughter and not just an adopted one? The text does not say. What it does say is that Moses, when he had grown up, saw the violence done to his own people and wanted to intervene (Exod 2:11–12). The text also indicates that he saw himself as their leader, a

<sup>215</sup> Root, *Transformation and Identity*, xi–xii.

<sup>216</sup> See pp. 64–65.

<sup>217</sup> See p. 65.

<sup>218</sup> Rimonte, “Colonialism’s Legacy,” 41, 57.

<sup>219</sup> See Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* (Quezon City: Tala Publications, 1975).

<sup>220</sup> Annie Beraquit, “As One Regime Totters, A Consciousness Is Born,” *Hartford Courant* (Sept. 12, 1983): 4, cited in San Juan, *Exile to Diaspora*, 31.

<sup>221</sup> Jessica Hagedorn, “The Exile Within/The Question of Identity,” in Aguilar-San Juan, *The State of Asian America* (see chap. 3, n. 107), 174.

view that was not shared by those he wanted to lead (Exod 2:13–14). Perhaps this indicates the stirrings of ethnic pride and the consciousness that he needed to do something for the people with whom he shared ethnicity. Perhaps it is a way of alleviating his guilt that he had been spared, while others had to suffer. However, even as he wanted to help his blood brothers, he still was not ready to sever ties with his Egyptian upbringing and identify fully with the exploited Israelites. And since he could not fully be an Egyptian, to be comfortable in Midian may have been a better option, even though he knew that he would always be a stranger there. Thus, God needed to transform Moses by reminding him of his common heritage with the oppressed Israelites in Egypt, and how the duty of this memory involves the duty of justice on their behalf.<sup>222</sup>

In some sense, part of my journey is like that of Moses. Although experiencing marginality through being silenced and made to feel invisible, I have not undergone the injustice and exploitation that other Filipino workers have suffered. I have lived, in many ways, a privileged existence, removed from the dehumanization that other migrants go through in their daily lives. My migration to the West is not driven by my family's economic need; it is also consistent with my intellectual, educational, and professional goals. Yet, although I am not ashamed of being a Filipino, I have sometimes felt embarrassed by stories of Filipinos being arrested or deported for overstaying illegally, or by news events in the Philippines that give my country and people a bad image in the international scene.

This sense of shame and embarrassment, according to Filomeno Aguilar, characterizes more the professional and non-manual labor migrants, who distance themselves from fellow nationals whose jobs as domestic and service workers are seen by high-status immigrants as demeaning to the national image. In Singapore, for example, in which Filipinos have been racially stereotyped as “maids,” some white-collar Filipino migrants feel humiliated in being lumped together by the public with domestic workers. Thus, they tend to create barriers that would segregate them from Filipino domestic workers, emphasizing their skills, higher status, and educational backgrounds and even concealing their nationality to cope with the shame.<sup>223</sup> The effect is

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<sup>222</sup> See p. 64.

<sup>223</sup> Aguilar, “Transnational Shame,” 120–25.

greater marginality. By trying to assimilate as much as possible to the host culture, they obscure their distinctive Filipino identity, only to find themselves not wholly accepted because of their brown skins, pug noses, and different accents. This sense of *hiya* (shame), the “uncomfortable feeling that accompanies awareness of being in a socially unacceptable position,”<sup>224</sup> is aggravated to the point that they retreat into the background, increasing their invisibility and marginality. At the same time, they alienate themselves from the majority of Filipino migrants involved in low-status manual labor, experiencing double marginality. On one hand, they are still subject to negative stereotypes by the host society because they are still Filipinos, regardless of how much they obliterate the marks of race, history, and culture; on the other hand, they are perceived by the majority of migrants as not “one of us,” not only because they have not experienced being a low-status worker but because they themselves share the host society’s stereotypes and look down on their nation and its low-status workers. Thus, like Moses, they undergo a double rejection from both peoples.

In some ways, I share the perspective of many professional and white-collar job migrants. Once in Hong Kong I visited a former classmate whom I had not realized was working there as a domestic worker. I asked her to accompany me to visit a Caucasian missionary referred to me by friends in the Philippines. I remember my embarrassment when the Caucasian missionary immediately assumed that I was a domestic worker myself. While on a study tour of Israel, I stayed at an inn in which the manager thought that I was one of the thousands of Filipino caregivers in Israel (some of them undocumented migrants, who were paraded publicly in chains when caught), and I tried to disabuse the impression because of the way he looked down on me. I have felt insulted and outraged while traveling alone when some men tried to pick me up because they thought all Filipino women are prostitutes or easy-to-get women. Although I have talked about being committed to the poor and the marginalized, I have not been willing to be fully identified with them and be classed as one of them. Like Moses in Midian, I have not made the jump toward full solidarity with my people and their plight.

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<sup>224</sup> Frank Lynch, “Social Acceptance Reconsidered,” in *Four Readings on Philippine Values* (ed. Frank Lynch and Alfonso de Guzman II; 4th ed.; Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1973), 15.

*Contradictions and Ambivalent Returns*

Like Moses, whose anxieties and contradictions made him hesitate to accept God's call to return to the land of his birth, upbringing, and family, many Filipino migrants are also torn between various contradictions that threaten to pull them apart. These prevent them from negotiating the change that would enable them to return to the Philippines permanently. Although they long for home, they are unsure whether they really want to return home.<sup>225</sup>

Indeed, for Filipino migrants, the word "home" is synonymous with the Philippines. When migrants return to the Philippines even for a visit they always use the phrase "*uuwi ako sa Pilipinas*" (I am going home to the Philippines). A Filipino song goes: "*Saang dako ka man ng mundo, Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore o Saudi, babalik at babalik ka rin*" (In whatever corner of the world you are in, you will keep on coming back...). "Home" is the place from which they are displaced and to which they must return to end their dislocation or partial citizenship.<sup>226</sup> Nevertheless, although many migrants see the Philippines as home, the fear of facing old situations at home keep them from returning back permanently. Because of this, it is not surprising that many of them do not return home even though they articulate the desire to do so.<sup>227</sup>

The stated reason for not returning permanently is primarily economic and the duty to provide for their families.

Everybody of us dreams of someday going home to the Philippines to be with our loved ones—far from the daily toil of cleaning toilets, washing other people's clothes, living with strangers who look down on us. But what will happen when we go home?...Many of us are trapped by the realization that, once we go home, we would have no source of income.<sup>228</sup>

The contract workers in Saudi Arabia also state economic reasons for coping with homesickness and loneliness. One popular T-shirt among

<sup>225</sup> Nicole Constable reports the ambivalent feelings of women who work as domestic workers in Hong Kong about returning home permanently. "At Home but Not at Home: Filipina Narratives of Ambivalent Returns," *CulAnthro* 14 (May 1999): 203–228. Available online: <http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org>.

<sup>226</sup> Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*, 55.

<sup>227</sup> Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*, 56.

<sup>228</sup> Tinig Filipino, "Are you Preparing for Your Future?" *Tinig Filipino* (March 1995): 36, quoted in Constable, "Ambivalent Returns," 204–205.

the workers has the sign “homesick versus dollar.”<sup>229</sup> It is not only homesickness, however, that they have to deal with, but also the lack of job security (since contracts can be terminated or not renewed anytime) and the minimal chances for upward mobility in the Saudi Arabian professional ladder (since the top jobs are reserved for Saudi nationals or Caucasians).<sup>230</sup> In the same way, Filipino entertainment workers in Japan are willing to take the high risks of being taken advantage of by illegal recruiters, endure the high costs of migration, and tolerate exploitative and dehumanizing conditions<sup>231</sup> because of the prospect of getting a higher income.

The economic reason then is the main one given for enduring the harsh realities of migrant life. However, the economic motivation is not primarily for individual advancement (although this plays a part), but for the welfare and comfort of the migrant’s family. Migration is “a strategy of family maintenance.”<sup>232</sup> For many families, migration is not an individual decision, but a familial one. Here, I recall the story of a friend who is an undocumented migrant, whose young son pleaded for her not to go home until they have saved enough to build their own house.

The economic motivation is the primary socially acceptable reason for migrating, one that allows the Filipino value of close family relationships to be upheld. Because migration breaks up families, a contradiction is created which threatens to pull apart the social fabric. The reason that one is migrating “for the sake of family” enables one to cope with this contradiction. The irony remains, however, that for the sake of the family’s economic survival, the emotional and psychological well-being of the family is sacrificed. Thus, staying “for the sake of family” can also be invoked by those who do not wish to migrate. The family then is cited as the reason for leaving, and the reason for staying.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Arnel F. de Guzman, “Katas ng Saudi”: The Work and Life Situation of the Filipino Contract Workers in Saudi Arabia,” *PhilSocSciRev* 51 (1993): 25.

<sup>230</sup> de Guzman, “Workers in Saudi Arabia,” 26–27.

<sup>231</sup> Jorge V. Tigno, “Migration, the Market and Society: Issues in Philippine Labor Flows to Japan,” *PhilSocSciRev* 51 (1993): 70.

<sup>232</sup> Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*, 63–64.

<sup>233</sup> Jane A. Margold, “Filipina Depictions of Migrant Life for Their Kin at Home,” in *Coming Home: Refugees, Migrants, and Those Who Stayed Behind* (ed. Lynellyn D. Long and Ellen Oxfeld; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 50.

However, economic factors are not the only reasons for the ambivalence about returning home. It may be the stated and acceptable reason, but this may cover other less socially acceptable reasons for remaining abroad.<sup>234</sup> Constable, through her interviews with several women, discovered that even though the economic motivation was initially the reason for working in Hong Kong, and was still the stated explanation for continuing to stay there, there were other complex reasons why these women did not return to the Philippines after finishing their contracts. These reasons have to do with changes in themselves and in their relationships with their families back in the homeland. "Filipinas discover, like other return migrants, that it is not always easy to fit back into their old lives and relationships because they have changed and home has been altered by their absence."<sup>235</sup> Home then becomes an idealized place, a Philippines that is the construction of their dreams, and is more comfortable when viewed from a distance.<sup>236</sup> When they do go home for a visit or with the intention to stay permanently, their "idealized" home is shattered as they face the harsh realities of life in the "real" home. Thus, to stay away is preferable because it is only in this way that they are able to keep the home of their dreams.

The contradictions that Filipino migrants struggle with are different from those that Moses faced. For Moses, the conflict is between his family of procreation and his family of origin; for Filipino migrants, the conflict lies between the economic needs of their family and its emotional and psychological needs. Moses has basically cut his ties with his family back in Egypt; Filipino migrants, on the other hand, still keep their ties with the "family back home," as seen in the regular sending of remittances and *balikbayan* boxes, the frequent communication through phone text messages, and the periodic visits to the country. Moses no

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<sup>234</sup> There is a marked difference between those migrants whose remittances are the main income of their families in the Philippines, and those whose financial contributions only aid their families' social mobility. The latter group gives other reasons for migrating: a desire for change, new experiences in other parts of the world, a more independent existence, or a way to escape from intolerable family situations, traditional roles, and burdensome relationships. Tacoli, "Migrating 'for the Sake of the Family,'" (see chap. 3, n. 100), 17–18.

<sup>235</sup> Constable, "Ambivalent Returns," 223.

<sup>236</sup> Constable, "Ambivalent Returns," 215. According to Gina Buijs "part of the process of crossing physical and metaphysical boundaries for migrants and refugees is an investment in an idealized perception of the society of origin or homeland," in *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities* (ed. Gina Buijs; Oxford: Berg, 1993), 3.



longer sees Egypt as his home; in many ways, Midian has become home to him, although he has not fully and will not fully integrate with the people there. Many Filipino migrants, on the other hand, particularly contract workers and those who still have family in the Philippines, still regard their country as home, although it may be an idealized one. Moses' inner conflicts were brought into relief by his vocation—God's call for him to be the messenger of God's deliverance to the Israelites. Filipino migrants, on the other hand, have not received such call; rather, their overseas employment has engendered many contradictions.

However, there are certain links that tie these two stories together. The family is central to both and the ambivalence about returning partly has to do with the needs and concerns of the family. Like Moses, Filipino migrants are eager to go back for a visit, but not for a permanent stay. In both cases, the focus on the family has obscured the needs of the larger community. In Moses' case, his comfortable life in Midian has somehow buried his memories of the sufferings of the Israelites. In the case of Filipino migrants, their desire for a better life for their families has loomed larger than the needs of the wider Philippines society, leading to a form of forgetfulness about the situation in the country. For although the remittances of migrants help prop up the cash-strapped government, the mass migration of teachers, technocrats and medical personnel has meant the loss of many skilled professionals, resulting in the scarcity of quality education, medical care, and innovative technology. For example, because of the dearth of nurses and doctors in the Philippines, a number of district hospitals have closed,<sup>237</sup> so that people with emergency ailments have to travel long distances and be put at risk in order to get medical help. The irony then is that, although the Philippines produces many highly trained doctors, nurses, teachers, and other professionals, their services are not employed in helping the country's own people, but are exported to other lands, to help those who are already better placed to avail themselves of competent medical help and educational resources.

The two stories are also linked by the issue of vocation. Moses was involved in the lowly task of taking care of someone else's sheep when God called him to go back to his own people and lead them out of their sufferings. In contrast, many Filipino migrants have left their vocation

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<sup>237</sup> PDI, "Stop Exodus of Nurses, Doctors, WHO urges RP," Sept. 20, 2005, [http://www.inq7.net/globalnation/sec\\_new/2005/sep./20-01.htm](http://www.inq7.net/globalnation/sec_new/2005/sep./20-01.htm).

as teachers, engineers, doctors, and nurses, leaving the country with no adequate human resources to train its youth, care for its sick, and expand its infrastructure, in order to be employed in the lowly task of taking care of another person's children, or of doing manual labor to build another nation's infrastructure, or of being a caregiver for the elderly or the sick in affluent nations.

Finally, both stories revolve around the issue of home and identity. Moses' dilemma was that he was not sure where his real home was, because of his uncertainty about his identity. In contrast, Filipino migrants do know where their home is—it is in the Philippines. It is, however, a home where they do not want to stay permanently, because their image of home has been altered by their migration experience, or rather, they themselves have changed, so that the real home no longer fits their expectations. In fact, like Moses, they are homeless, because the Philippines is a home about which they have negative or ambivalent feelings, a home which cannot fulfill their "American dream" of upward mobility and financial success. Moreover, their sojourn overseas has changed them so that when they do return, they cannot help but feel a form of alienation, and in some cases, even aversion.

Even though I do not feel ambivalent about going back to the Philippines since I feel a strong commitment to resume my life and ministry there, I am not without anxieties as I prepare to return. Like the Israelites in Egypt, my people are not in a good place. Even though Filipinos are not in a situation of state slavery like the Israelites, they are enmeshed in political and economic woes that enslave and oppress them. In fact, in the five years that I have been away from my country, the political and economic situation has become worse. The hopes raised by people power movements that ousted dictatorial and corrupt leaders in the past have all dissipated. What remains are negativity, cynicism, and despair. The current president cannot govern effectively because of a continuous barrage of accusations of corruption. The legislative agenda is bogged down by constant infighting among politicians. Many political and economic reforms have not been put in place, leading to further stagnation and disempowerment. As a result, the problems of widespread poverty, crime, corruption, unemployment, and insurgency are not fully addressed, leaving the people with no clear option except to go overseas to try to gain a better life.

The political and economic situation has also deeply affected my family in the Philippines and the seminary with which I am connected. I have siblings who now find themselves unemployed and unable to find

work, after being employed and enjoying financial stability for many years. Because of the economic situation, enrollment in my seminary has dropped, while costs have spiraled, so that it has become a challenge to meet the monthly budget. The seminary has also gone through many difficulties, making it a less happy and more dysfunctional place than it was before I left. My return to the Philippines then is accompanied with a great deal of financial insecurity and emotional anxiety.

Moreover, after living in North America for many years, I have experienced changes that may make it more difficult for me to fit back into my old roles and rhythms of life. Even though I see the Philippines as my home, circumstances have changed so that I have been displaced from the place in which I used to live, and have no concrete space to call "home." Thus, I can identify with the anxieties of Moses as he prepares to go back after having settled so comfortably in Midian. I wonder what difference my presence would make in the Philippines, when it is so bogged down with problems that I cannot even begin to understand, let alone help to solve.

### *From Marginality to Liminality*

Marginality is often confused with liminality, especially in connection with migration, because both states have to do with being betwixt-and-between. However, one can be marginal without being liminal, although to be liminal means necessarily entering a position of marginality. To be marginal is to be in the peripheries, to be invisible, to live a subaltern existence. Since liminal states have to do with living in the boundaries of existence, with its attendant structural invisibility, passivity, and lowly state,<sup>238</sup> being a liminal person necessarily means experiencing marginality.

Being marginal, however, does not necessarily translate into liminality. Although one's marginality can be due to one's in-between state, this position of being neither here or there may not necessarily lead anywhere. One can be stuck in a marginal position all of one's life. "Marginals like liminars [the ritual subjects in the limen stage] are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution to their ambiguity."<sup>239</sup> Liminality, however, has to do with the movement from one structured state of

<sup>238</sup> See p. 165.

<sup>239</sup> Turner, *Dramas and Metaphors* (see chap. 4, n. 265), 233. Insertions mine.

existence to another. "Ritual liminars are often moving symbolically to a higher status, and their being stripped of status temporarily is a 'ritual.'" To be marginal can mean the limiting or closing of possibilities; to be liminal, on the other hand, is the beginning of all sorts of possibilities.

Moses in Midian was a marginal person. As a גר he was peripheral to Midianite society. His "in-between" state came from being situated in the boundaries of Midianite, Hebrew, and Egyptian cultures. He was not, however, a liminal person in the sense that he was transitioning from one structure to another. Moses was content to dwell in Midian with his father-in-law Jethro, his wife, and his children. He was not going anywhere. Without the encounter at the burning bush, Midian could have been the end point of Moses' life. It was the call of God that made Midian into a liminal period and Moses into a liminal person. With the return to Egypt beckoning as a possibility, the marginal life in Midian became imbued with a transitional character, an in-between state between the Egypt of Moses' upbringing and the Egypt of his prophetic calling. It was in this liminal space that Moses was transformed, receiving a new identity that enabled him to fulfill his role as God's spokesperson to the Israelites.

Migrants are marginal but not necessarily liminal. They are "marginals" since they are "simultaneously members (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from and often even opposed to, one another."<sup>240</sup> Spatially, they dwell at the boundaries; politically, they do not occupy the centers of power; socially, they are part of a minority; culturally, they are not fully integrated and accepted; psychologically and spiritually, they do not have a well-defined and secure identity.<sup>241</sup> In order for transformation to take place, however, these experiences of marginality must be turned into liminality. Marginalization then becomes a phase in a rite of passage, in which the experience of marginality is turned into a possibility.

Filomeno Aguilar has connected international labor migration with a ritual passage, which partakes of the character of a pilgrimage.<sup>242</sup>

<sup>240</sup> Turner, *Dramas and Metaphors*, 233.

<sup>241</sup> Phan, "Betwixt and Between" (see chap. 3, n. 109), 113.

<sup>242</sup> Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr., "Ritual Passage and the Reconstruction of Selfhood in International Labour Migration," *Sojourn* 14 (April 1999): 98–139. Available online: Business Source Premier Database, <http://weblinks1.epnet.com>.

According to Turner, a pilgrimage is a liminoid phenomenon, in that it has some of the qualities of passage rites, but since it is voluntary rather than an obligatory social mechanism, it is properly called liminoid or quasi-liminal rather than liminal. In a pilgrimage, there is homogenization of status, ordeal, movement as against stasis, reflection on the meaning of religious and cultural values, and the emergence of *communitas*, the sense of communion or comradeship among fellow pilgrims. These characteristics mark the limen or mid-way stage of a rite of passage.<sup>243</sup>

Aguilar argues that, for Filipino contract workers, working overseas is like a pilgrimage since they see it as “a journey of achievement” that is expected to culminate in economic success, a rise in social status, and the transformation of the self. Thus, the migrant is willing to endure hardships, sacrifices, and dislocations and take great risks, displaying fortitude and determination through all these, with the hope of a successful homecoming in the future. Aguilar describes migrant workers as liminal persons because of their exclusion from their communities (whether their host or home community), their lack of status, and their being positioned in a temporal limbo where the migrants’ past and future are irrelevant to their terms of employment.<sup>244</sup>

I think, however, that Aguilar has confused liminality with marginality, for the characteristics he describes do not necessarily express liminality. For liminality to take place, the period of migration must be seen as a transition period and a place of potentiality. Aguilar is on firmer ground when he describes the time of a contract worker’s employment abroad as an intermediate period, which ends in a successful return to the homeland, with success being defined in economic terms. The homecoming is marked by ritual gift giving, as the migrant returns loaded with extravagant gifts, and by festive rites intended to welcome the returnee. The return stands in stark contrast to the migrant’s life abroad, which is characterized by marginalization and loss of status. Because of her or his economic contributions to the kin group, the migrant’s status is elevated, and this may translate into a greater role in the decision-making process of the family. As a result of this change of status and the experience of negotiating life amidst the struggles of

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<sup>243</sup> Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 34–35; 253–54. See also Turner, *Dramas and Metaphors*, 166–228.

<sup>244</sup> Aguilar, “Ritual Passage,” 3. Page numbers refer to web pages.

working overseas, the migrant returnee acquires a new sense of self, demonstrating more confidence, self-esteem, and greater independence after his or her return home.

What, in the country of employment, may appear as low status positions become inverted: low status converts to high status and prestige, low purchasing power to consumerist prowess, absence of authority to a newfound confidence, liminality into accomplishment.<sup>245</sup>

Of course, not everybody is successful in this secular pilgrimage. The journey can be truncated by illness, by inability to find employment, by exploitative conditions that force the worker to go home prematurely, by a misdemeanor or a crime, or simply by the incapacity to withstand the rigors of a migrant life. However, those who do finish their contract and go home with extravagant presents and money in their savings account, or better yet, after having married a foreign national, are regarded as *panalo* (a winner), someone who has been able to emerge triumphant in the fight (*laban*). On the other hand, those who go home empty-handed and defeated are covered in shame (*hiya*).<sup>246</sup>

Aguilar's casting of the migrant worker's experience as a ritual passage is, I think, insightful. Although migrants themselves do not use the language of ritual pilgrimage to describe their experience, there is enough in their statements and actuations to show that, for them, going overseas is indeed a journey of achievement. Aguilar also gives emphasis to the importance of human agency in migration. Migration studies have tried to address the structural forces, whether international or domestic, which lead to migration. What is often neglected, however, is the role of the individual agent in the whole migration process. Often there is an emphasis on the host country's reception of the migrant or the conditions in the sending country that impel migration, but not enough stress is placed on the individual agent—his or her perceptions, decisions, and transformations.

The metaphor of ritual pilgrimage to understand labor migration is helpful, but it has its limits, as Aguilar himself acknowledges.<sup>247</sup> First, the pilgrimage metaphor is completely secularized. In Turner's pilgrimage model as a liminoid phenomenon, what is emphasized is the spiritual aspect of the pilgrimage. The pilgrim's journey toward the

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<sup>245</sup> Aguilar, "Ritual Passage," 11.

<sup>246</sup> Aguilar, "Ritual Passage," 4, 8–11.

<sup>247</sup> Aguilar, "Ritual Passage," 2, 11–12.

sacred center involves the divestiture of what is mundane or profane in order to focus on religious and cultural values, and to find sources for healing and renewal. In the same way, liminars are stripped of status, authority, and power, but they find sources of sacred power in the reception of divine knowledge and in the resurgence of nature liberated from structural bonds.<sup>248</sup> These aspects, however, have been purged from the secular pilgrimage of Filipino migrants, whose goal is mostly concentrated on improving one's economic lot, with its corresponding rise in social status in the country of origin. In the pursuit of this goal, migrants try their luck (*suerte*), risking everything even to the point of using illegal means to gain entry, with the hope that fortune would come their way.<sup>249</sup> Moreover, they assuage the pain of marginality by the consumption of expensive commodities that act "like mirrors to the self as these objects seem to say 'You are now a new person, you no longer need to be deprived, you are well-off, you are an emerging winner in life.'"<sup>250</sup> The identity that emerges then, which comes from a secularized and commercialized liminal experience, is one that is constructed by global capitalistic consumerism.

More important than this, however, is that the contract worker's journey does not result in his or her reintegration into society. The successful homecoming is only temporary. Migrants go home to shower their family and relatives with gifts and to accept the adulation of their kin group, but they often leave again to pursue greener pastures. Having been changed by the migration process and having been shaped by a consumerist mentality during their stay overseas, they can no longer be satisfied with conditions at home, nor fully fit again into their old roles. Since their new identity is based on their capacity to send remittances and provide their families with imported consumer goods, this identity easily crumbles when they return home and this capacity is terminated.

By thus fulfilling the metaphor of the self-transforming pilgrimage, international labor migration rescinds and nullifies the very same pilgrimage metaphor in so far as the returnee cannot be fully re-incorporated into society. The metaphor's fulfillment is its destruction.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 249.

<sup>249</sup> Aguilar, "Ritual Passage," 5–7.

<sup>250</sup> Aguilar, "Ritual Passage," 15.

<sup>251</sup> Aguilar, "Ritual Passage," 12.

Aguilar does not include in his metaphor of ritual pilgrimage the experience of Filipino professionals because, according to him, their “career trajectories are not intended to culminate in the homeland.”<sup>252</sup> Yet many of those who go overseas, regardless of their type of work, nurture dreams of settling in some Western country, preferably in the U.S.A., and eventually, bringing their whole family with them. Thus, the metaphor of a pilgrimage breaks down regardless of whether one migrates as a manual labor contract worker or as a highly skilled professional with full intention not to return. Working or studying overseas results in changes to the self, but these changes are not conducive to an eventual permanent homecoming. Moreover, the changes wrought by the migration experience are brought to bear only on the needs of the individual and the family, rather than used for the service of the wider community.

Thus, an alternative type of pilgrimage is needed, one informed by a different story. The narrative of the return of Moses’ family to Egypt and their liminal encounter with God provides one such story. It relates the account of a migrant who may have become so comfortable in his adopted home that, notwithstanding his feelings of being a stranger there, he was no longer willing to return to the land of his birth. It is the story of one who continued to feel the pain of being a stranger, but who was afraid to relocate lest he experience a double dislocation.

Because of the colonial experience, the impact of Western media, and the reports of those who have gone overseas and have come back loaded with the trappings of consumerism, Filipinos have been shaped by the story of the American dream. Thus, they continue to leave in droves in pursuit of economic prosperity, upward mobility, and the freedom to buy what they want. In the pursuit of this dream, they go back repeatedly to work abroad, and if an opportunity opens, decide to settle permanently outside the country, despite their longing to go home. Moreover, they perpetuate this story by their glowing reports of life overseas, which brackets out their humiliating experiences,<sup>253</sup> and by sending home the symbol of success—US dollars and foreign-made consumer items.

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<sup>252</sup> Aguilar, “Ritual Passage,” 2.

<sup>253</sup> Because migrant workers think that only fellow workers can understand the humiliations and insults that they suffer, they conceal their negative experiences from their family and friends in the Philippines. If their everyday pain is told at all, it is always in the context of adventure that leads to a successful homecoming. See Aguilar, “Transnational Shame,” 117–18; Cf. Margold, “Filipina Depictions,” 49–64.



I have not been uninfluenced by this story. Whenever I go back to the Philippines for a visit, I feel the pressure to bring with me consumer goods that are too expensive or unavailable in my country. The giving of *pasalubong* (going-home presents) then goes beyond being a thoughtful or generous act, but by its extravagance and great quantity, becomes the mark of a successful return and a way to elicit the approval and admiration of my kin group and my immediate community.

Exodus 4:18–26 is a different story altogether, because it relates the account of a migrant who returned in response to a call. Although there was no reason for Moses to go back to Egypt, his story took on a different turn when God commissioned him at the burning bush. The return migration then was necessitated by the call of the other. Moreover, it was made possible by a rite of passage that enabled Moses to effect the change from his marginal life in Midian to his important role as God's spokesperson in Egypt. Moses entered into a liminal period where his identity was confronted and where he encountered a death experience that threatened not only him but also the continuity of his family line. This death threat from God, however, paved the way for him and his family to receive a new identity through a symbolic rite that speaks of death and rebirth, of continuity and discontinuity, of promise and hope.

This story then is significant for Filipino migrants because it opens up new possibilities by which they can construe their experiences, shape their identities, and orient their future actions. In the following section, I retell the story of the return in a way that would make it productive in forming an alternative narrative identity for Filipino migrants.

### *The Story of a Migrant Returnee: Themes for a Narrative Identity*

#### *The Call of the Other*

The story of the return of the migrant was initiated by a call from God. Moses did not go back because there was a personal reason for him to do so. He went back because God called him. God's call in turn was instigated by the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt: "I have surely seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt and I have heard their cries because of their oppressors, for I know their sufferings" (Exod 3:7). The call to return was not purposeless. The call to return came out of God's concern for the Israelites, who were suffering under the oppression of the Egyptians. The divine call then also involved the call to be in solidarity with the suffering other.

Moses was not going back to an ideal situation. The return was not prompted by the knowledge that the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt had improved. In fact, it had become worse, to the point that the people had expressed their torment in an agonized groan. God had seen the marginalization of the Israelites in Egypt and he had seen the marginal life of Moses in Midian, and had called the marginal one back to be a vehicle of hope to the marginalized ones. However, Moses the migrant did not want to go back. Nothing awaited him in Egypt except possible death and suffering.

God's call to Moses started with a call to remembrance. God calls Moses to remember his links with the Israelite ancestors: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:6). Notwithstanding his marriage to a Midianite and his Egyptian upbringing, Moses was still a successor to that long line of descendants, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, who called on the same God and to whom God had made a promise. Thus, God had a claim on him, and so did the rest of the Israelites. Moses could not distance himself from the sufferings of his own people because he shared with them the same lineage. Nor could he refuse to take part in God's project of delivering the Israelites because of God's claim upon his life.

Understandably, for a multitude of reasons, Moses was hesitant. He voiced his sense of inadequacy to do something about the Israelites' situation. He shared his doubts that the people would find him credible enough to be taken seriously. He professed lack of knowledge and lack of skill. But lurking in the background were other complex reasons: the uncertainty of what was ahead, fears for his and his family's security, his worries about not being accepted and not fitting in, the terrifying fear of Pharaoh's enormous power and threat to Moses' life, or perhaps, a lack of interest and apathy to do something about the Israelites' agonizing situation. He did finally decide to go back and take his family with him, but there were signs that it was a temporary homecoming. He was going to visit his kinfolk and see how they were doing; nevertheless, he seemed to have entertained only the idea of a temporary stay. Seeing that Moses had taken the first steps and knowing his reservations, God encouraged him with an assurance that he had nothing to fear in terms of his life. God also made a pledge to deal severely with Pharaoh whom Moses feared.

The story of God's call to Moses and Moses' response to the call opens up several possibilities for Filipino migrants. First, it shows that

the return need not be oriented by the global capitalistic consumerist mentality of success. There is an alternative “journey of achievement” which is defined not by economics, but by commitment and service. Indeed, there have been some who have returned out of a sense of a call and out of love for God, country, and people. Their story is less common and less recognized, but theirs too is a pilgrimage and a homecoming of sorts, but one informed by a different narrative. This, in an archetypal way, is the story of Ninoy Aquino who, after being in exile for many years, returned to the Philippines even at the cost of his life.<sup>254</sup> It is the story of overseas workers who were able to find good and stable jobs outside the country, but who came back out of a sense of purpose and a desire to serve back home. It is important that the Filipino community hear more of these stories and thus redefine their ideas of a “successful homecoming.”

Second, the story of God’s call to Moses shows that there are other claims in life than the claims of one’s immediate family and kin. The labors and aspirations of Filipino migrants are primarily directed toward the well-being and security of their families. Although the members of a family have individual desires and hopes, these are negotiated with and sometimes subsumed under the needs of the family as a whole. Nevertheless, individualism as a trait still manifests itself in prioritizing the claims of the family, to the exclusion of other claims.<sup>255</sup> Filipinos have an inherent religiosity so that they do not question that God has a claim on their lives. Even so, God’s claims are often identified with the family’s claims. In the Exodus story, however, God’s claims are identified with the claims of the suffering community, and in Moses’ case, they posed a conflict with the claims of his own family. Thus, for Filipino migrants, the story of Moses helps to relativize the needs of the family in light of God’s prior claim and the needs of the wider Filipino community, for whom migrants owe an obligation due to their shared lineage and memory. It provides other reasons for returning than just “to visit the family.” Because the return is motivated by a sense of

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<sup>254</sup> The return of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino in 1983 and his assassination on the airport tarmac upon his return was the impetus to the growth of a people power movement that ousted Ferdinand Marcos from a twenty-year dictatorship and installed Ninoy’s widow, Cory Aquino, as the country’s president.

<sup>255</sup> See Mina Ramirez, *Understanding Social Realities Through the Filipino Family: A Phenomenological Approach* (Manila: Asian Social Institute Communication Center, 1984), 35–38.

call, whether the call of God or the call of the suffering community, the migrant is more likely to stay despite the hardships involved in return migration.

The response to the claims of the wider community is supported by the Filipino core value of *pakikipagkapwa*, which lies at the root of all Filipino social interactions, and which is based on *kapwa*, the “recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others.”<sup>256</sup> Thus, others (*iba-sa-akin*), whether outsiders (*ibang-tao*) or insiders (*hindi ibang-tao*), are not seen as separate from oneself (*sa akin*).<sup>257</sup> This is especially true of one’s relationship with fellow Filipinos—the insiders—which calls forth *pakikiramdam*, a heightened awareness and sensitivity to the feelings and situation of others,<sup>258</sup> and demands the full realization of *pakikipagkapwa* in *pakikipagkaisa* (solidarity), in which there is total trust and identification with the other.<sup>259</sup> The core value of *pakikipagkapwa*, which orients Filipinos toward solidarity with the plight of their fellow Filipinos, challenges the migrants’ commitment to family, also a core Filipino value, but one that has been molded by the colonial experience toward the pursuit of the American dream.

Third, by imaginatively entering into Moses’ inner conflicts and by following the temporal progression of Moses’ hesitations and reservations, Filipino migrants can also explore their fears and hesitations about returning home permanently. Many migrants have expressed the desire to return, but are waiting for a time when the Philippines would be in a better place economically and politically. Moses’ story shows, however, that not all return migrations are convenient. Sometimes, God may call people to go back to their homeland precisely because it is not in a good place. The narrative, however, recognizes that return migration is not easy. It was not easy for Moses and it is not easy for any migrant. The fears would always be there, but so is God’s encouragement and assurance.

One wonders why God chose Moses to be the spokesperson and the one tasked to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Why did God not call one of the Israelites who were victimized in Egypt? After all, God did this with Gideon when Israel was under the power of the Midianites,

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<sup>256</sup> Virgilio Enriquez, *From Colonial to Liberation Psychology: The Philippine Experience* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1992), 43.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Enriquez, *Colonial to Liberation Psychology*, 61.

<sup>259</sup> Enriquez, *Colonial to Liberation Psychology*, 53.

encouraging him out of his feelings of bitterness and powerlessness (Judg 6:1–40). Would not a victim who had been empowered have been a better choice? Moreover, there would have been no problems of acceptance, for a fellow victim would be seen as “one of us.” Yet oddly, God called Moses, who was plagued by identity problems, who grew up in a privileged environment, a person who was considered an “outsider” in all the cultures in which he lived, a migrant with no intention of returning to his country of origin.

But as a migrant, Moses may have developed what Edward Said calls a “plurality of vision.” According to Said, exiles are able to develop a “contrapuntal” perspective, that is, they become aware of simultaneous dimensions that make possible an originality of vision, by virtue of their crossing borders and breaking barriers of thought and experience.<sup>260</sup> Aside from the resources of their original cultural tradition brought into interaction with their host culture, they also have access to another tradition, that of “the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group.”<sup>261</sup>

Moreover, those who have been victimized often lose their visionary power for liberation, and therefore this role often is better performed by the outsider/insider.<sup>262</sup> Moses’ multicultural and marginalized experience perhaps enabled him to see things that the ones left behind in Egypt could not see. Having been raised up as an Egyptian, he was not intimidated by the Egyptians nor captured by a slave mentality. Having lived outside Egypt and having seen other lands, he could imagine what it meant when God promised a new land for the Israelites. Having expanded his horizons, he knew that there were other possibilities in life than being a state slave in Egypt. Filipino migrants, too, because of their cross-cultural and marginalized experience, have the potential to develop a plurality of vision. Indeed, according to many Filipino migrant workers, their overseas experience has enabled them to have a better perspective on the country’s problems. More importantly, it has led to a more empowered self.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 185–86.

<sup>261</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 20.

<sup>262</sup> Charles Ringma, written comments.

<sup>263</sup> Aguilar, “Ritual Passage,” 9–11.

I, too, have received God's call to return. Without this call, it would have been easier to entertain the possibility of staying in the United States or moving to another Western country, so that I could grow in scholarship and avail myself of academic and financial resources and opportunities that are sparse in my country. But I have been called to go back to my own people and identify with them in their sufferings. However, I am yet to find out whether my migrant experience will make a difference in my perspectives and whether it will redefine my various roles in the community.

### *Effacement of Identity*

Despite the importance of the call, it was not sufficient to prepare Moses for his new role. Moses started out with a confused identity and a conflicted self; he needed a renewed identity to fit his calling. However, the new identity could not come about without the effacement of the self. Through Moses' experience of marginality in Midian, the journey to a new identity began. Moses became a fugitive and an outlaw, and took on a lowly, dependent and outsider position, and in doing so, he was forced to loosen the trappings of the high-status Egyptian identity by which people readily identified him. Questioning one's identity, however, is not a comfortable experience; it can lead to feelings of alienation and loss. In the case of Moses, his migrant experience only deepened his sense of estrangement.

Effacement of identity is something that Filipino migrants go through since, as discussed above, many of them end up in low-status, low-paying jobs that are below their educational attainment and employment experience. To negotiate such changes successfully requires an alteration of one's previous definitions of self. Effacement of identity reaches its peak in the experience of invisibility and subalternity, in which culturally, socially, and legally, migrants are treated as non-persons.<sup>264</sup>

It is in the effacement of identity that marginalization and liminality overlap. Marginalization results in anonymity, which leads to the loss of personal identity. This loss, however, sets the stage for other possibilities. "The pilgrim engages in the negation of self in order to recover the self in an altered, elevated self."<sup>265</sup> Without marginalization, liminality cannot take place. And yet, liminality can only take place

<sup>264</sup> Aguilar, "Transnational Shame," 115.

<sup>265</sup> Aguilar, "Ritual Passage," 3.

if marginalization is made productive as a place of new insights and new possibilities. “[L]iminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be.’”<sup>266</sup> Many migrants remain marginal, but not liminal, and therefore are unable to realize the potentials of their migrant state. By embracing their marginality and incorporating it as part of a transitional state, migrants can place themselves in a position of transformation.

Nevertheless, the loosening of a previous identity can go in both directions. On one hand, it can lead to greater identification with one’s people. On the other hand, it can result in distancing and indifference, due to the passage of time and the blurring of memories. There are indications that this may have happened to Moses. In response to God’s initial call, he did not express any interest or concern for the situation of his fellow Israelites, whereas he had intervened in their affairs before. Moses seemed to have forgotten his life and kin in Egypt.

Many Filipino migrants become more conscious of their national identity as a result of their overseas sojourn.<sup>267</sup> Because the dominant society subsumes individual identity under ethnic and racial stereotypes, “issues of personal and social identities merge and converge, and the resolution of this double crisis leads to a reinforcement of the worker’s identity as a Filipino.”<sup>268</sup> Moreover, regional differences become blurred as migrants see themselves linked together by being born on a piece of earth that can be externally identified on a map—the Philippines, “*sariling atin*” (our very own).<sup>269</sup> Yet the opposite can take place, as when high-status professional workers distance themselves from fellow Filipinos, whom they consider below their status, and from affairs in the Philippines that embarrass them. Aguilar recounts the story of a Filipino-American couple who prohibited the display of the Philippine map in their home in California, to ensure that their children would not acquire a Filipino identity.<sup>270</sup> There are also others who try to staunch the pain of the loss of identity by a turn to consumerism. Hence, instead of a new self that emerges from the experience of marginality,

<sup>266</sup> Turner and Turner, “Image and Pilgrimage,” 3.

<sup>267</sup> Nicole Constable, “Dolls, T-Birds, and Ideal Workers: The Negotiation of Filipino Identity in Hong Kong,” in *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia* (ed. Kathleen M. Adams and Sara Dickey; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 223.

<sup>268</sup> Aguilar, “Transnational Shame,” 116.

<sup>269</sup> Aguilar, “Transnational Shame,” 118–119.

<sup>270</sup> Aguilar, “Transnational Shame,” 109.

the old colonial self is merely strengthened by the increased capacity to purchase Western commodities and name brands.

Due to the passing of time, the geographical distance, and the necessity of adapting into a new environment, Moses may have forgotten his Israelite ancestry. Thus, he no longer felt involved with the affairs of the Israelites in Egypt, and also felt powerless and inadequate to challenge the powerful structures that had brought about the Israelites' suffering and oppression. God's call, however, was a call to memory and to the duty of memory, which is the work of justice. It arrested Moses from a complacent, apathetic, and self-doubting state. Even so, he went back to Egypt reluctantly and without undergoing the transformation required for him to fulfill his calling and duty. Moses was still torn apart between the fragmented experiences of the past, the soon-to-be-gone small joys of the present, and the anxieties of the future.

### *Death Experience*

The return of Moses, the migrant, was abruptly interrupted by a death encounter that threatened not only him, but also the well-being and continuity of his family. The return required him to enter a timeless, ambiguous, and vulnerable zone where past and present certainties no longer applied. In this zone, the convictions concerning God's character, God's call and the decision to respond to that call were all put into question. In addition, the self's very capacity to act was paralyzed. The temporal experience of being "distended" between past, present, and future was suspended as the migrant and his family faced a life-threatening existential moment.

Yet the death experience in this liminal zone was necessary to facilitate the return of Moses and the entry of his family into the Israelite community. We can only surmise what this death encounter meant for Moses; often the events that leave a lasting mark remain hidden and unarticulated. Perhaps, Yahweh's menacing presence showed him that God is not to be trifled with, and that those who do so, even one as powerful as Pharaoh, bring peril to themselves. Perhaps it pushed him to an acknowledgment of his own inner conflicts and his lack of resolution concerning identity. Perhaps, the threat of being obliterated unblocked his memory, so that he was able to see clearly his own links to the ancestors of Israel, and the duty that this memory entails for the present generation. Perhaps the threat to his family's safety and continuity made him appreciate the grave threat that Egyptian policy posed to the life, security, and well-being of Israelite families. Whatever



happened in this mysterious encounter, we do know that it was a turning point in the transformation of Moses and that it paved the way for his acceptance and reintegration into the Israelite community and the fulfillment of his sacred vocation.

Filipino migrants may not experience a death encounter with God, as Moses did. Yet the story provides an opportunity to reflect on the importance of a similar death experience when embarking on return migration. This is especially true for those who are returning out of a desire to serve the home community.

In a penetrating essay, Gerald Burns analyzes a recurring theme in Filipino second-language fiction—the repatriate experience.<sup>271</sup> In several Filipino novels spanning several centuries,<sup>272</sup> there is the portrayal of repatriate-as-hero returning from overseas “in search of a whole personal and cultural identity,” inspired by ideas culled from the sojourn abroad, with a broad vision or a specific plan “for the betterment of the home community.”<sup>273</sup> The repatriate project, however, either as “curer” or “liberator” ends in failure for various reasons: resistance from the indigenous community that does not share the repatriate’s foreign-inspired vision (*Noli Me Tangere; His Native Soil*), a trick of circumstances that dooms a specific mission to a lost cause (*El Filibusterismo; The Power of the People*), or the moral failings of the repatriate himself that seduce him toward the colonial ills he is criticizing (*The Pretenders*). In a second essay, Burns continues the analysis of the repatriate theme in contemporary Philippine Fiction, a theme that appears mostly in short stories.<sup>274</sup> Whereas in the earlier novels there was still hope of

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<sup>271</sup> Gerald T. Burns, “The Repatriate Theme in Philippine Second-Language Fiction,” *PhilStud* 40 (1992): 3–34.

<sup>272</sup> Burns analyzes the following works: Rizal, *The Social Cancer* [*Noli Me Tangere*, 1886] (trans. Charles Derbyshire; 2d. ed; Manila: Philippine Educational Company, 1926); *The Reign of Greed* [*El Filibusterismo*, 1891] (trans. Charles Derbyshire; 2d. ed; Manila: Philippine Educational Company, 1927); Juan C. Laya, *His Native Soil* (Manila: University Publishing Company, 1940); Carlos Bulosan, *The Power of the People* [ca. 1955] (ed. E. San Juan; Quezon City: National Books Store, 1986); and F. Sionil Jose, *The Pretenders* [ca. 1962] (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1966).

<sup>273</sup> Burns, “Repatriate in Second-Language Fiction,” 25, 6.

<sup>274</sup> Gerald T. Burns, “The Repatriate Theme in Contemporary Philippine Fiction,” *PhilStud* 40 (1992): 320–32. Burns analyzes the stories of Ninotchka Rosca, “Bitter Country,” in *Bitter Country and Other Stories* (Quezon City: Malaya, 1970) and Benjamin Pascual, “Selmo Comes Home,” in *Ilocano Harvest: A Collection of Short Stories in English by Contemporary Ilocano Writers* (ed. Pelagio Alcantara and Manuel S. Diaz; Quezon City: New Day, 1988).

a synthesis between foreign and indigenous claims to the repatriate's identity and plans for social change, the more recent stories no longer hold such possibility and even reject the desirability of such project.<sup>275</sup> The returnee never becomes reintegrated into the home community, and is left isolated in an internal world or else returns overseas, full of disaffection and more alienated than ever.

Doubtless, the portrayal of the repatriate in Philippine Fiction refers more to the experience of the elite, the highly educated middle-upper class, who have the resources to travel and study in the West. The advantage of distance and their cross-cultural experience has given them a better perspective of the country's problems, and so they go home fired up with messianic zeal to change Philippine society. To their disappointment, their uncritically acquired Western-inspired ideas do not work, or conflict with indigenous resources for change; or else, their imposition of their vision without adequate groundwork and time is strongly resisted, or accepted only on the surface. Their elitist sense of superiority, reinforced by their Western education, could not but hinder their project. In many of the earlier novels discussed by Burns, a small possibility for change opens up only after the protagonist dies, suggesting that some form of death needs to take place before lasting change may occur. Burns quotes Padre Florentino, a character in Rizal's novel *El Filibusterismo*: "The vessel must be shaken or broken to release the perfume, the stone must be struck to raise a spark."<sup>276</sup> Perhaps this can be taken as a metaphor for the necessary death to the elitist perspectives and dreams that the country's middle-upper class need to undergo before they can become catalysts for change. This reminds me of the earlier failure of the elitist Egyptian-raised Moses to bring about a change in the situation of the Israelites, because he himself has not been transformed.

But even overseas contract workers, which comprise the majority of Filipino migrants, are not exempted from undergoing something akin to a death experience before they can permanently settle back home. There may be adverse circumstances that may block a migrant from a smooth and painless return, no matter how well intentioned. There may be health and relationship issues, financial setbacks, disapproval from

<sup>275</sup> Burns, "Repatriate in Contemporary Fiction," 320.

<sup>276</sup> Jose Rizal, *El Filibusterismo (Subversion)* (trans. Leon Ma. Guerrero; London: Longman, 1965), 296; quoted by Burns, "Repatriate in Second-Language Fiction," 11.

friends and family, delays in the return migration process, difficulties in adjustment and re-entry, feelings of emptiness and lack of productivity. All these might converge to the point where the migrant returnee questions whether the decision to return was right after all.

Moreover, return migration requires a form of dying to some aspect of one's old self, whether this was the self that existed prior to migration, or the self that has been formed by migration. "You can definitely go home again," says Eula Grant, an Afro-American who returned back to the South after migrating to the North for many years. "You can go home. But you can't start from where you left. To fit in, you have to create another place in that place you left behind."<sup>277</sup>

For Filipinos, a death experience may involve the purging of one's colonial captivity, or one's consumerist mentality, or the thinking that anything Western is necessarily superior. It may mean the unblocking of memory so that one completely embraces the duty of memory by being in solidarity with the victims of colonization and globalization. This may mean embracing a lifestyle that is economically and socially lower than the one that one has become used to abroad, or giving up some of the independence that one has acquired as a result of living away from the close network of relatives and friends. It may entail relinquishing the dream of upward mobility and success, or facing the prospect of falling short of family expectations. It may also mean the loss of one's identity prior to migration, which one may expect to resume upon return. The biblical narrative does not prescribe what a death encounter would look like, but it invites one to reflect on what form it might take in one's own life.

For me, returning back to the Philippines involves dying to the desire for scholarship that has led me to take postgraduate studies in the West, but that cannot be sustained fully in my country because of the lack of academic resources. It means giving up some of the independence and solitude I have enjoyed in living on my own, away from the well-meaning, but sometimes excessive and intrusive pressure of relatives and friends. It means embracing downward mobility and going against the expectations of my kin group and the general community. There may be other forms of dying that God will cause me to undergo as I return, but the narrative of Moses' return helps to prepare me not

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<sup>277</sup> Carol Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 199. Emphasis removed.

to expect that the life that I once lived and the things that I am looking forward to resuming will be the same, or that my roles will be the same. In some sense, my going back to the Philippines will mean an end to my marginal life in the West, since having a Ph.D. automatically means a change to a higher status. Yet in order to carve a new life for myself back in the Philippines, I will have to be prepared to relinquish old roles that were a source of personal significance and worth to me, and take on new ones that may be less popular and have less immediate effect.

### *Rites for the Family*

The issue, however, was not just Moses, but also his whole family. Although the call was directed to Moses, the return itself was a family affair. However, even though they were implicated in the decision to return, Moses' family was not part of the decision-making process and potentially could hinder Moses from fulfilling his role. The story suggests that Moses had not seen the importance of his family in his divine calling, but had kept his family affairs separate from his vocational role.

God's encounter with Moses, however, threatened the continuity and security of the family and forced a confrontation with this dichotomous state. Moreover, it exposed the ambiguity of the family's position as seen in the omission of the rite that would indelibly mark the son's identity, and of the whole family as well. However, it was not Moses who perceived what was lacking, but Zipporah, the mother, who saw the threat and acted to avert it. Zipporah saw that the family was in a precarious and ambiguous position and she acted quickly to resolve the ambiguity by performing a rite that would leave no doubt as to the family's identity. In doing so, she redefined relationships and roles within the family and charted her family's future.

Zipporah's proactive stance reminds me of the major role that Filipino mothers play in the affairs of the family. The Filipino mother is a co-equal contributor to the economic well-being of the family, and sometimes its principal economic source.<sup>278</sup> She is also the moral center of the home and impresses herself on the emotional life of the

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<sup>278</sup> It is no wonder then that more than half of Filipino migrant workers are women. Women feel constrained to provide for their families and this propels them to work as caregivers abroad while the husband or other relatives are left with the care of the children.

children.<sup>279</sup> Like Zipporah, the Filipino mother may need to play a key role in how the Filipino family, particularly the migrant's family, will imagine and negotiate its future.

It is significant that the mark of the new identity was made on the son, the representative of coming generations. The son's circumcision puts a stamp on the kind of life the future generations will have—what community they will belong to, what identity they will assume, what lifestyle they will follow. Perhaps this suggests that the kind of future that parents have envisioned for their children will eventually decide whether a migrant returns to the home country or not. Filipino parents often say that they are only migrating for the sake of their children and would not have left if they are only considering themselves and not their children. Yet by deciding what is desirable for their children, they are also defining their own identity and values.

The involvement of Zipporah and the son in Moses' divine call shows the importance of the family in vocational and life choices, particularly if they would involve return migration. Just as the decision to leave is not an individual choice, so the decision to return would have to involve the whole family. This is particularly true in Philippine culture where the family plays a central role in everything that the individual member does. A study shows that one of the main factors in Filipino migrants' decision to return is the advice of family and close friends. Since, in Filipino culture, close friends are those whom one considers part of the extended family, it is no wonder that those whose close friends settle back in the Philippines are more likely to do so as well.<sup>280</sup> The same study also shows that those who eventually return are the ones who originally expected to stay for five years or less.<sup>281</sup> The length of actual stay overseas is not as important as the original intention to stay for a limited period of time. This indicates that the propensity to return or to stay abroad is already formed even before the migrant leaves, so that circumstances overseas, like work opportunities and favorable treatment from the host community, are not the dominant factors orienting a migrant's decision to return. Rather, pre-existing values and intentions

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<sup>279</sup> Niels Mulder, "Filipino Culture and Social Analysis," *PhilStud* 42 (1994): 81.

<sup>280</sup> Ricardo Abad, "Social Links, Perceptions of Opportunities, and the Propensity of Migrants to Return Home: The Case of Filipino Graduates in New York City" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1975), 166–73.

<sup>281</sup> Abad, "Social Links," 146–47.

before migration as well as family influence (which includes the extended family) are the crucial factors in the decision to go back.

The ethical formation of the family then is crucial in the migration process. Thus, the shaping of a narrative and ethical identity should not just be directed toward the individual, but also toward the family, including the extended one. The story of the American dream is so pervasive in Philippine society that it would require a major effort to introduce and instill an alternative story. Proclamation alone cannot do it. Rather, rites that would involve the whole family are needed.

The passage of Moses and his family from death to life was effected by a rite that expressed the themes of death and rebirth in a symbolic and embodied form. The rite of circumcision functioned to resolve Moses' indecision and the ambiguous identity of his family. It showed an irrevocable change of state, marking a separation from a previous state of life and an entrance into a new phase of identity, vocation, community, and status. It also opened an alternative future for the coming generations, charting the path ahead of them toward solidarity with, and integration into, rather than separation from, the Israelite community.

Rites both express and accomplish what is intended. They not only have the capability of inculcating and forming values by their very structure of repetition and their engagement of the total person, but their performative characteristics effectively bring about change even at a precognitive level. Moreover, they exercise the imagination and in so doing unfold potential scenarios and possibilities. They are therefore crucial in times of transition and decision-making, especially when the changes envisioned involve great costs and long-term consequences.

Rites are an integral part of Philippine culture. These rites are always communal events, marked by elaborate ceremonies and much feasting. In the religious sphere, Filipinos move toward "the direction of vision, image, ritual, reflection, meditation" rather than to a cognitive articulation of propositional truths.<sup>282</sup> Thus, rites play a vital role in forming the narrative identity of Filipinos, and consequently, their ethical identity.

Perhaps new rites are needed that would signify a break from our colonial past and propel us Filipinos toward a new identity. Such rites

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<sup>282</sup> Benigno Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987), 6.

would have to express the narrative of the Filipino colonial experience and its resulting confusion of identity and captivation to the American dream. It would have to show the dynamics of separation and incorporation, of death and rebirth. For migrants specifically, it would need to embody the movement from marginality to liminality in response to the call of the other, whether this is in the form of service to God or in the choice to be in solidarity with the suffering community. Filipinos have goodbye rites (*despedida*) and welcome rites (*bienvenida*). However, as discussed above, welcome rites for migrant workers are often cast in the “journey of achievement,” with an emphasis on the giving and receiving of Western-made consumer goods. They are also performed mostly within the family or the clan, and not within the faith community. Although religious rites are used to send off missionaries or to install religious workers, they are not used for sending off or welcoming migrant workers. Thus, workers leave and return, and leave again, without making a connection between their journey and their religious faith. Perhaps religious rites are needed that would make meaningful a migrant’s journey in terms of service, rather than achievement, and that would move the migrant toward integration with the home community.<sup>283</sup> Only then perhaps can the pilgrim-returnee be “given a role in improving the community originally left behind, the culmination of a ritual journey consistent with the universal narrative of the repatriate experience.”<sup>284</sup>

The story of Moses as a migrant-returnee incorporates transformational themes that can shape the narrative identity of Filipino migrants. It illuminates the experiences of marginality and loss of identity and shows how these can potentially lead to personal growth, a greater commitment to one’s people and country, and plurality and originality of vision. The story emphasizes service, as expressed in *pakikipagkapwa*, rather than achievement, God’s call instead of a comfortable family life, and the importance of a disjunctive death process and of rites that would facilitate transition at the time of return. In this way, it acts an alternative story to the narrative of the American dream of upward

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<sup>283</sup> Appropriate rites may include the reading of and reflection on Exod 4:18–26. In rites of homecoming, instead of gifts that symbolize economic prosperity, alternative symbols could be found that would express the migrant’s return in terms of service, solidarity, and commitment. A helpful starting point is Joyce Rupp, *Praying our Goodbyes* (Quezon City: Claretian, 1989), with its many prayers and rituals for saying goodbye.

<sup>284</sup> Aguilar, “Ritual Passage,” 3.

mobility and financial success that orients most Filipino migrants. According to Ricoeur, reading is “a provocation to be and to act differently.”<sup>285</sup> By making a decision to act differently, Filipinos working and living overseas and those who are still planning to go overseas can translate the narrative identity that has been formed by this story into an ethical identity.

#### MEDIATING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT: SHIFTS IN THE HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS

Although there are obvious discontinuities between my Filipino reading and the readings of early Jewish and Christian communities due to changes in the horizon of expectations, there are continuities as well. The primary question that oriented the past reception of the text still predominates in contemporary readings: Why did God (or the angel of God) try to kill Moses (or the child)? The answers of earlier communities to this question were framed in two ways. On one hand, there was a preoccupation with causes, so that the attack was regarded as being provoked by a violation of a moral norm. On the other hand, there was a focus on aims rather than causes, so that the intention of the attack and what it sought to achieve were emphasized. Nevertheless, whether the focus was on cause or intention, the answers were all related to the uncircumcised state of Moses' son. However, each reading interpreted the meaning of the child's uncircumcised state in a different way, and reflection on this meaning provided the occasion for ethical appropriation.

The translators of the LXX and the Targums assumed that Moses, having violated a moral norm by not circumcising his son, was threatened by death as a punishment for his transgression. Thus, they focused on the act of atonement, expanding the cryptic phrase **חתן דמים** to emphasize the atoning power of blood. The rabbis who produced the *Mekilta*, the Mishnah, and the Talmuds also assumed that Moses was guilty, but their emphasis was more on Moses' obedience (or lack of it) to the command of circumcision, rather than on the atoning power of circumcision blood. Nevertheless, they also believed that the attack was precipitated by a violation of a moral norm. There is, however,

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<sup>285</sup> *TN* 3:249.



an attempt to deflect full responsibility from Moses by an explanation of why Moses failed to perform the rite. The Palestinian Targums explain that Moses' father-in-law pressured him not to circumcise his son, while the *Mekilta* and the Talmuds justify Moses' actions by stating that he was in a hurry to obey God and return to Egypt. However, even though his action was acceptable at first, the angel of God sought to kill him because he further delayed the rite after his arrival at the inn. From the point of view of the rabbis, the command to circumcise a male baby was so important that to delay it could not but lead to grave consequences.

Origen and Augustine did not address the issue of the reason for the attack. Gregory and Ephrem, however, interpreted the death threat in terms of what it was supposed to achieve. For Gregory, the angel's attack was intended to purge what was harmful and impure in the uncritical combination of philosophy with Christian doctrine. For Ephrem, the death threat helped both Moses and Zipporah to realize that they needed to put God's concerns over family desires.

The Filipino reading set forth above also focuses on the aims of the attack rather than its causes. I do not assume that Moses committed a transgression; hence, I see no role for the expiatory function of blood. Hence, a great gap exists between my horizon and the horizon of the translators of the LXX and the Targums, who see that the attack could only have been caused by sin. Scripture itself, however, gives instances when God treats people like an enemy even though they have not committed sin.<sup>286</sup> I proposed in chap. 4 that the attack was necessary to resolve the ambiguous identity of Moses and his family, to ensure the family's integration into the Israelite community in Egypt, and to enable Moses to fulfill his calling. This focus on the ethical aim rather than on moral causes is consistent with Ricoeur's focus on ethics as the "aim of the good life." It may even prove to be a more fruitful approach, especially in this difficult text, in which the cause of the attack is nowhere mentioned.

There is one other question that is shared by past and present readings: How could God attack Moses (or the child)? Early Jewish and Christian interpretations consistently answer: It was not God who was directly responsible for the attack, but the angel, and in some instances, the "destroyer" or even Satan. My reading attributes the action directly

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<sup>286</sup> The prime example is Job.

to God, following the MT, as do some contemporary readers.<sup>287</sup> Perhaps some postmodern sensibilities are more open to the notion that God can engage in destructive and even incomprehensible acts, and thus such readers are more prepared to accept the text of the MT.

The focus on the role of the family in some of the readings finds echoes in the Filipino reading set forth above. Whereas I emphasized the crucial role of the family in Moses' hesitancy to return to Egypt, the Palestinian Targums and the *Mekilta* explain that Moses' failure to circumcise his son was due to family compromise. The significance of the family comes up again in the reading of Ephrem the Syrian, in which Zipporah is portrayed as preventing Moses from full obedience to God. The recurring theme of the family in the various readings shows that the role of the family is an important issue for this text.

One interesting vignette in the *Mekilta* is the scene where Aaron learned that Moses was planning to take his wife and sons to Egypt. Aaron objected: "We are already distraught about the ones who came here earlier, and now are you bringing upon us new ones?"<sup>288</sup> This reminds me of how a migrant's return may not be welcomed by the home community and may be perceived as an additional burden to already strained resources. It is better, in the opinion of many families, for a family member to stay abroad so that he or she can keep on contributing to the family coffers.<sup>289</sup>

In the LXX and the Targums, Zipporah is given a prominent role as both circumciser and intercessor. My reading continues this tradition in that it sees Zipporah as a marginal mediator who plays a crucial role in helping Moses negotiate the transition to his new status and role as God's spokesperson to the Israelites. Rabbinic literature, however, diminishes the role of Zipporah; Gregory sees her foreignness as both positive and negative; and Ephrem regards her as a stumbling block to Moses' complete obedience and sanctification. After this incident, however, she and Moses, in Ephrem's interpretation, become models of Christian sanctification, understood to mean sexual abstinence within marriage.

The element of foreignness, although a minor issue, is taken up in the readings of the *Mekilta* and Gregory of Nyssa. The *Mekilta* identifies

<sup>287</sup> E.g., Penchansky, *Rough Beast* (see chap. 4, n. 62), 73–74.

<sup>288</sup> *Mek.* 2:166. See p. 252.

<sup>289</sup> A similar scene is recorded in *Exod. Rab.* 4:4. When Moses told Jethro that he was taking his wife and sons to Egypt, Jethro replied: "Those who are in Egypt wish to go out, and you would fain take them there!"

foreignness with idolatry. The failure to circumcise is a foreign practice, which is connected to the service of “strange” gods. In Gregory of Nyssa, foreignness is interpreted to refer to pagan learning.

In the readings of these Jewish communities, circumcision is seen as a literal act, which needs to be performed as part of one’s obedience to God. However, among early Christians, whose position on circumcision had been oriented by New Testament writings, literal circumcision was no longer seen as necessary. Thus, when confronted by this text, a new question arose: What does circumcision symbolize for the life of a Christian? Early Christians did not discount the importance of circumcision, as can be seen in their interpretation of Exod 4:24–26. Origen, for example, believed that circumcision had an apotropaic function, in that it was able to protect from a hostile power the ones who have undergone the rite. Nevertheless, now that the coming of Christ has rendered the rite void, circumcision is no longer to be taken literally. Thus, for Augustine, who sees a parallel between circumcision and baptism, Exod 4:24–26 can be taken to support certain practices regarding baptism. Gregory employs it to teach the proper use of secular learning in the Christian life. Ephrem utilizes it to encourage Christians toward sanctity as expressed in sexual abstinence and the willingness to put God above family affairs. The Filipino interpretation set forth above follows this tradition. As a Filipino Christian, whose horizon of expectation does not include the practice of circumcision as an important religious or moral obligation, my reading of the text takes its place among these early Christians who interpreted circumcision in a symbolic way. For Filipino migrants, circumcision symbolizes a successful transition back into the homeland, marked by a new identity, status, and the consciousness of a call to service.

Despite the great divergence between the way the text has been received by early Christians and the way I am proposing that it be appropriated among Filipino migrants today, the past and present readings are not completely unrelated. Augustine’s identification of circumcision and baptism as prefiguring death and resurrection parallels the liminal experience of death and rebirth. In Gregory, the removal of the foreign and harmful elements from secular philosophy is akin to the purging of the colonial perspective, which, I argue, may be necessary for migrants to integrate fully into the home community and serve it more effectively. Ephrem’s emphasis on putting God’s affairs above family concerns is echoed in the need for Filipino families to be supportive of the migrant’s decision to return in response to a call.

According to Jauss, a change in horizons often leads to new questions that actualize a potential for meaning in the text that could not yet be realized in the past because the conditions for it still did not exist. Thus, it is possible for the present interpreter to ask a question that would reveal facets of meaning which were undiscovered in the past.<sup>290</sup> The global phenomenon of migration is one such change of horizon. When reconfigured through the eyes of a Filipino migrant, the text receives a new configuration that can be ethically appropriated today in new and relevant ways. Thus, Ricoeur's narrative movement of prefiguration—configuration—refiguration acts like a spiral that unleashes new prefigurations and configurations in the act of refiguration.

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<sup>290</sup> Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 30–32.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSIONS AND PROJECTIONS

At the end of this long itinerary, we come back to the problem we posed at the beginning of this study: How can First Testament narratives be appropriated ethically without being reduced to an ethical model approach? Ricoeur's narrative theory suggests a way forward. Ricoeur contends that narratives do not provide ethical models for life; rather, their ethical power rests in their capacity to open up possibilities for living and for forming one's identity. Playing with these possibilities through an act of imagination leads to growth in practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and an enlarged self, as one takes on a narrative identity which, when acted upon, is translated into an ethical identity.

Ricoeur shows how this process takes place through the operation of emplotment—the movement from prefiguration to configuration to refiguration. The strength of this threefold movement is that it is able to draw out the potentials of a text and actualize its power to reshape the reader's identity. This can happen because Ricoeur does not see the text as a closed system but as one that transcends the boundaries of the textual world to encompass both the lived experience that gave birth to the text and the lived experience of the reader of the text. However, the text does not merely reproduce the practical reality that lies behind the text but configures it through an inventive process that has the capacity to transform the world in front of the text.

Ricoeur's approach to symbol and metaphor is fruitful in unpacking the surplus of meaning in the rites and symbols found in the First Testament. I have used Ricoeur's theory of metaphor as a gateway for accessing the multivalent meanings of the symbolic rite of circumcision in the First Testament. These meanings are then used to understand the symbolic significance of the performance of the rite in Exod 4:25.

Ricoeur's method allows for the use of various approaches in an integrated way. Thus, in interpreting Exod 4:18–26, I have employed narrative criticism, speech act theory, ritual studies, and reader-response approaches. I have not used diachronic approaches as much, yet Ricoeur's theory allows for their use, especially in the role he gives to symbols, which he understands as rooted in specific cultural systems,

and to explanations, which function to help readers understand the story better when this is blocked by a lack of knowledge of the cultural and linguistic context. Other biblical passages than Exod 4:18–26 may require other approaches. Ricoeur's method does not preclude the use of differing approaches but encourages their deployment to enable readers to follow the story better.

Ricoeur gives an indispensable place to the real reader. For Ricoeur, the ethical significance of the narrative would not be realized without an actual flesh-and-blood reader who would operationalize the movement of emplotment in the act of reading. Indeed, the identity-forming function of narrative would only be possible through the engagement of a real reader. Thus, I have acted as the real reader of the text and, reading from a specific social location, I have sought to show how the Exodus passage can be significant for Filipino migrants. In order to do this it was necessary to show what prefigured actions in the world of the reader and the world of the text are common, including the symbolic and ethical significances of these actions in each world. Thus, I have identified farewell and leave-taking, migration, attack on the traveler, and circumcision as the actions that are ethically salient. Of these, the action of migration and the symbolic significance of circumcision would be the most pertinent for Filipino migrants.

These disjointed actions, however, do not make a story. They need to be configured through the mediating action of the plot. Using Ricoeur's notion of discordant concordance, I have shown how the different actions identified in the text thwart the expectations of readers but, at the same time, the plot's synthesis of the heterogeneous makes it possible for readers to work out some form of coherence. I have argued that when read in the context of the immediate narrative unit (Exod 2:23–4:31), Exod 4:18–26 should be taken as narrating a liminal experience. Thus, the ambiguity in the pronouns, the threat of death from the deity, the lack of clear-cut moral boundaries, and the act of circumcision all speak of a transitional period in a rite of passage that leads to a change of identity. This transition involves the transformation of Moses from a marginal person in Midian with a confused identity to a new status and vocation as God's spokesperson in Egypt with an unambiguous Israelite identity. It also involves the initiation of Moses' family into their new identity as part of the Israelite community. This transformation is expressed and encapsulated in the rite of circumcision, which speaks of death and rebirth, of separation and incorporation.

The dialectic of discordant concordance in the action of the plot constructs a narrative identity for Moses that enables Filipino migrants to explore their own possibilities and construct their own narrative identities. When read from the perspective of the Filipino migrant community, the text within its bigger narrative unit has ethical possibilities because it speaks about migration and the resulting marginalization and loss of identity that take place. The story, however, does not stop at a marginalized existence. Rather, it goes on to show a movement from marginality to liminality in response to the call of the other, setting into motion the process of return migration. Nonetheless, return migration is not easy, but requires something akin to a death experience. I stated in this work that rites are needed in order to negotiate such a transition. Moreover, these rites need to be rooted in the context of the family since in the world of the text and in Filipino culture the family plays a crucial role in an individual's ethical choices, when understood in terms of practices, life plans, and life projects.<sup>1</sup>

I have proposed above that the narrative of Moses' return to Egypt provides an alternative to the story of the American dream, with its global capitalistic and consumerist underpinnings, that orients many Filipino migrants and their families and shapes their identity. Rather than a journey of achievement measured primarily by economic success, Moses' story shows the return of a migrant with a sense of God's call and a desire to respond to the needs of his people. Moreover, it speaks of a permanent return and not a temporary one, and how this is made possible through an identity-forming death experience and a rite that involves the whole family.

Return migration, including the forces that drive it and its unsettling consequences for both the returnee and the receiving communities, has received scant attention in migration research largely because the dominant globalization paradigm has emphasized global mobility, hybridity, and diasporization.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even with the rapid growth of the diaspora, there is also a steady trickle of those who choose to go back to their home countries in order to re-establish themselves, even though the conditions there may not be ideal.<sup>3</sup> Such homecomings "contain

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 46–47.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Markowitz and Anders H. Stefansson, eds., *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> Lynellyn D. Long and Ellen Oxfeld, eds., *Coming Home: Refugees, Migrants, and Those Who Stayed Behind* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1–2.

elements of rupture, surprise, and perhaps, disillusionment.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the story of Moses’ return to Egypt can serve as a point of reflection not only for Filipino migrants, but also for other migrants and displaced persons—both for those who choose to go home and for those who are longing to go home, but are hesitant to do so—and even for those who are thinking of leaving home. New reconfigurations may arise as this story is read by other migrants of different nationalities and ethnicities with their own particular experiences and questions. Indeed, the refiguration that I have set forth above is a new prefiguration that releases other possibilities in terms of how this story will be configured and refigured not only by me and by other Filipino migrants, but also by other situated readers.

I have set my Filipino reading in conversation with the readings of various Jewish and Christian communities in the past. Although there are obvious discontinuities, there are also links that show the Filipino reading as part of a tradition consisting of both sedimentation, that which is stable, and innovation, that which is new. The interaction further shows that a change in the horizon of expectations leads to a change of questions asked of the text and thus a change in the answers themselves. The context then decides the questions and the text partly decides the answers, whether this be in critical scholarship, pre-modern interpretation, or in postcolonial and postmodern interpretations.<sup>5</sup> One area of further research is to extend the analysis of Jewish and Christian interpretation and appropriation of this text into the second millennium in order to see whether there are other commonalities and differences arising from shared or dissimilar contexts. A more in-depth study could also be done in understanding the “horizon of expectations” of each given period and the way this relates to the particular interpretation given to the text.

One major issue that has not been dealt with in this study is God’s identity as a character in the narrative. I stated in the introduction the problems involved in postulating the imitation of God as the basis for First Testament Ethics, in that in some passages in Scripture, God seems to act in puzzling and destructive ways. Writers in First Testament narrative ethics sidestep these problematic texts altogether and focus only on the human characters, or on the character of God in so far as

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<sup>4</sup> Markowitz and Stefansson, *Homecomings*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> John Goldingay, email communication.



God's character expresses what is deemed desirable. Although I have attempted to deal with one of these difficult texts, I have mainly focused on the human characters and their possibilities. This does not mean, however, that I do not see the character of God as ethically salient. I do believe, however, that another angle could be taken in place of the imitation of God approach. As I mentioned in chap. 2, I think that Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, as applied to the character of God, is helpful in understanding these puzzling texts because it conceives of identity as an interplay of discordance and concordance. Thus, one should not be surprised that God's character in First Testament narrative includes discontinuities and contradictions. This is part of the dialectic of sameness, the stable self, and selfhood, the changing self, which are constituent elements of a narrative identity. I have argued above that God's narrative identity, conceived as sameness and selfhood, has ethical saliency because it calls forth a certain response from that self that feels certain about its knowledge and agency. This response has to do with the self's acknowledgment of its own limitations and fragility.<sup>6</sup>

In Exod 4:18–26, especially in vv. 24–26, the element of discordance and the identity of God in terms of selfhood come into the forefront. I have suggested above that these discordant and changing aspects come under the category of limit-expressions, which act as a corrective to the dominant and concordant images of God in the bigger narrative unit (Exod 2:23–4:31). Further study needs to be done in the constitution of God's narrative identity in this passage and the response of the self that it calls for. This study can be developed along the following lines, using Ricoeur's notion of personal, narrative, and ethical identity.

As in the construction of the narrative identity of Moses, it is necessary to go beyond Exod 4:18–26 and interpret it within a bigger unit in order to explore fully the dialectic of sameness and selfhood in God's identity. I propose that the second narrative unit (Exod 2:23–4:31) be taken as the passage in which to do this analysis. Using Ricoeur's categories of personal identity in *Oneself to Another*,<sup>7</sup> I would start out by looking at the identifying references for God. This means that I would analyze the third-person descriptions of God made by the narrator and by other characters in the story outside a situation of interlocution. These descriptions can be proper names, predicative statements, or deictic pronouns.

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<sup>6</sup> See pp. 54–59.

<sup>7</sup> See pp. 38–41.

This third-person approach to identity, however, according to Ricoeur, is inadequate, since the subject, God, is only spoken about rather than as one involved in the act of self-designation in the act of speaking. Thus, to complement the descriptions of God in the third-person, there should also be an analysis of God in the first and second persons, where God is a speaking subject in a situation of interlocution. Here, I would focus on the commission scene between God and Moses, and study God's self-reference when talking to Moses, and Moses' reference to God during their intercourse. A major point of this section is God's self-description of the "Name," as expounded in Exod 3:14.<sup>8</sup> On first reading, the revelation of the Name fits into the over-all framework of a call narrative, which affirms the authority of the prophet by establishing the authority of the sender.<sup>9</sup> But, as Ricoeur points out, the enigma of the Name overflows its narrative framework and generates a surplus of meaning that the history of reception captures through the production of varied translations.<sup>10</sup> These translations oscillate between the Name as the expression of a dynamic concept and that of Being as unchanging existence, which is reminiscent of the interplay of discordance-concordance in the plot, and of sameness-selfhood in personal identity. Thus, it would seem that the Name itself encapsulates God's narrative identity, with its concordant and discordant aspects and its stable and changing characteristics, as depicted in Exod 2:23–4:31.

From an analysis of God's utterance, I would then shift to an analysis of God's action in the text, as a third person narration, or as a first or second person utterance. The focus of this study would not only be a description of actions, but an analysis of the motivations and causes behind God's actions, as they are stated or indicated in the text. Again, Ricoeur sees these approaches as insufficient because they conceptualize identity only from the angle of sameness. So lastly, I would look at the temporal dimension of God's character and the dialectic of sameness and selfhood in God's identity as it is revealed in the interplay of discordance and concordance in the narrative unit. Whereas the bigger narrative unit would show the concordant features of God's character, the smaller unit of Exod 4:18–26 would heighten

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<sup>8</sup> See André Lacocque, "The Revelation of Revelations," in Lacocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically* (see chap. 1, n. 30), 307–29.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation," in Lacocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically* (see chap. 1, n. 30), 335–36.

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, "Interpretation to Translation," 337.

the discordant features. My intuition is that Exod 4:18–26 functions in a metaphorical way similar to a parable,<sup>11</sup> in that it creates a tension between the vision of reality presented in 4:18–26 and that which is shown in the bigger narrative unit of 2:23–4:31.

From these conceptualizations of God's identity, I would then explore the various responses of the self that are being called for by the different categories of personal identity stated above. This is just a bare sketch of a study that I plan to undertake in the future, but which I hope is enough to show the potential fruitfulness of such approach.

In summary, the significance of this study lies in several areas. First, it demonstrates that Ricoeur's narrative theory is productive in interpreting First Testament narratives and exploring their ethical possibilities. Furthermore, the work of Ricoeur shows the hermeneutical importance of a situated reader-interpreter in engaging and enlivening the text. Second, it is able to show that a difficult First Testament text such as Exod 4:18–26 can have some form of coherence, in a way that can speak to the pain and challenges of the contemporary world of dislocation and migration. Lastly, this work makes a contribution to non-Western, post-colonial biblical scholarship and shows its capacity to speak anew to the realities of marginalization. In doing so, it also challenges Western values and preoccupations.

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<sup>11</sup> See p. 20.



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